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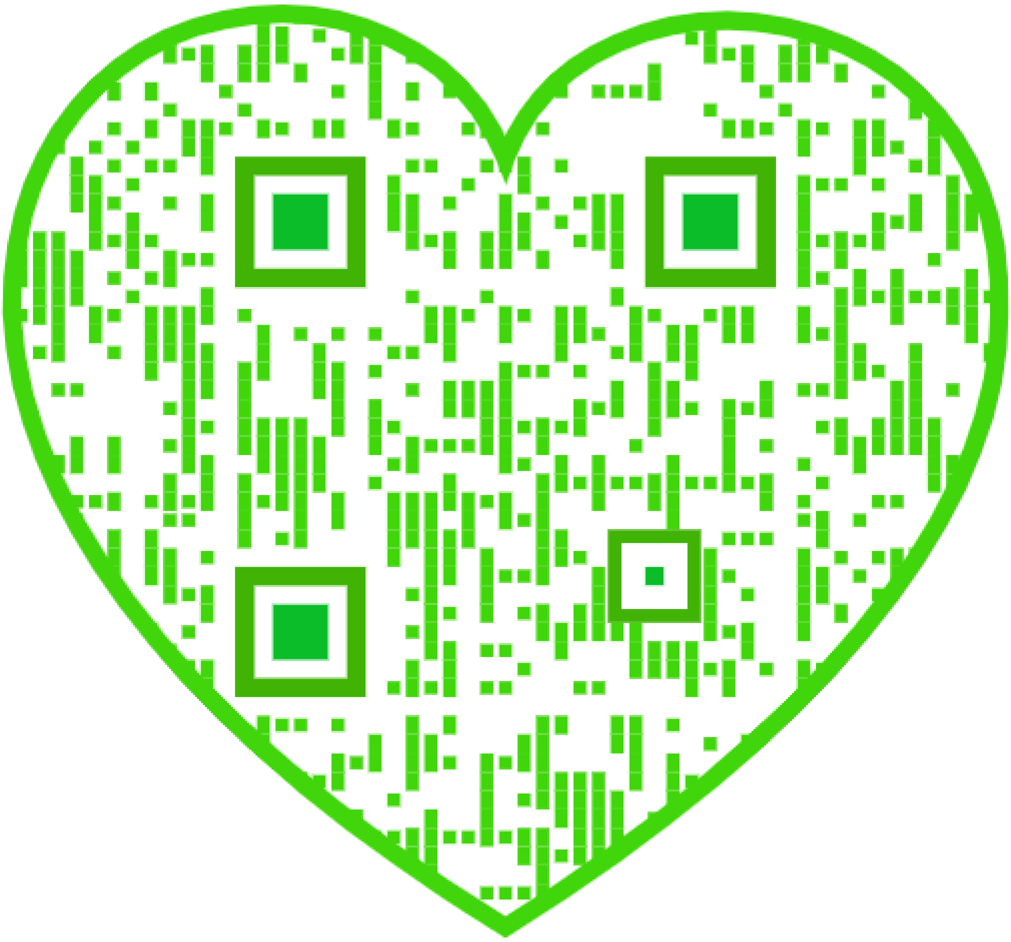

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Bamboo forest, Kyoto, Japan.
Cover: Dubrovnik, Croatia

**WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN TRAVELERS.** Throughout mankind's history, we've left our homes on journeys both near and far. Sometimes the journey was necessary, to search for sources of food or to evade danger, but just as often it was spurred by pure curiosity. To find out what lies over that hill, through that valley, across that ocean. In doing so, we've discovered astounding places—lush forests, thunderous waterfalls, vast plains of salt. And along the way, we've added impressive contributions of our own construction, from cliff dwellings to ornate temples. One of the true joys of modern life is that we're able to experience almost any of these inspiring places with a little planning and a passport. Sure, it's always nice to return home. But after absorbing a special trip's thrilling sights and deep experiences, we return as somewhat different people—for the better. Your own soul-stirring journey begins in the pages of this special, globe-spanning publication, by seeing what types of vistas and histories speak to your inner explorer. From there, the only real question that remains is: **WHERE WILL YOU GO FIRST?**

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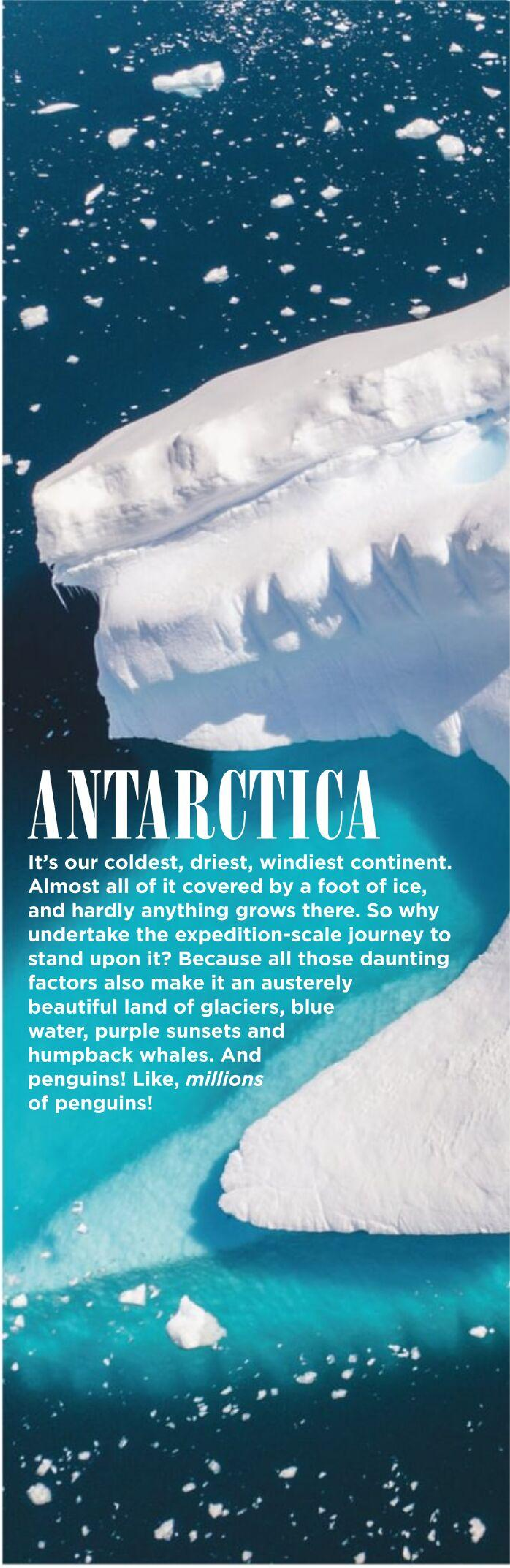
# Statue of Liberty

## NEW YORK CITY

When gifted to the United States by France in 1886, Lady Liberty was already loaded with symbolism, from her aloft torch meant to enlighten the world down to her exposed foot upon a broken shackle. The copper-clad colossus came to represent even more to waves of immigrants arriving to Ellis Island and Americans in need of solace as the events of 9/11 unfolded.



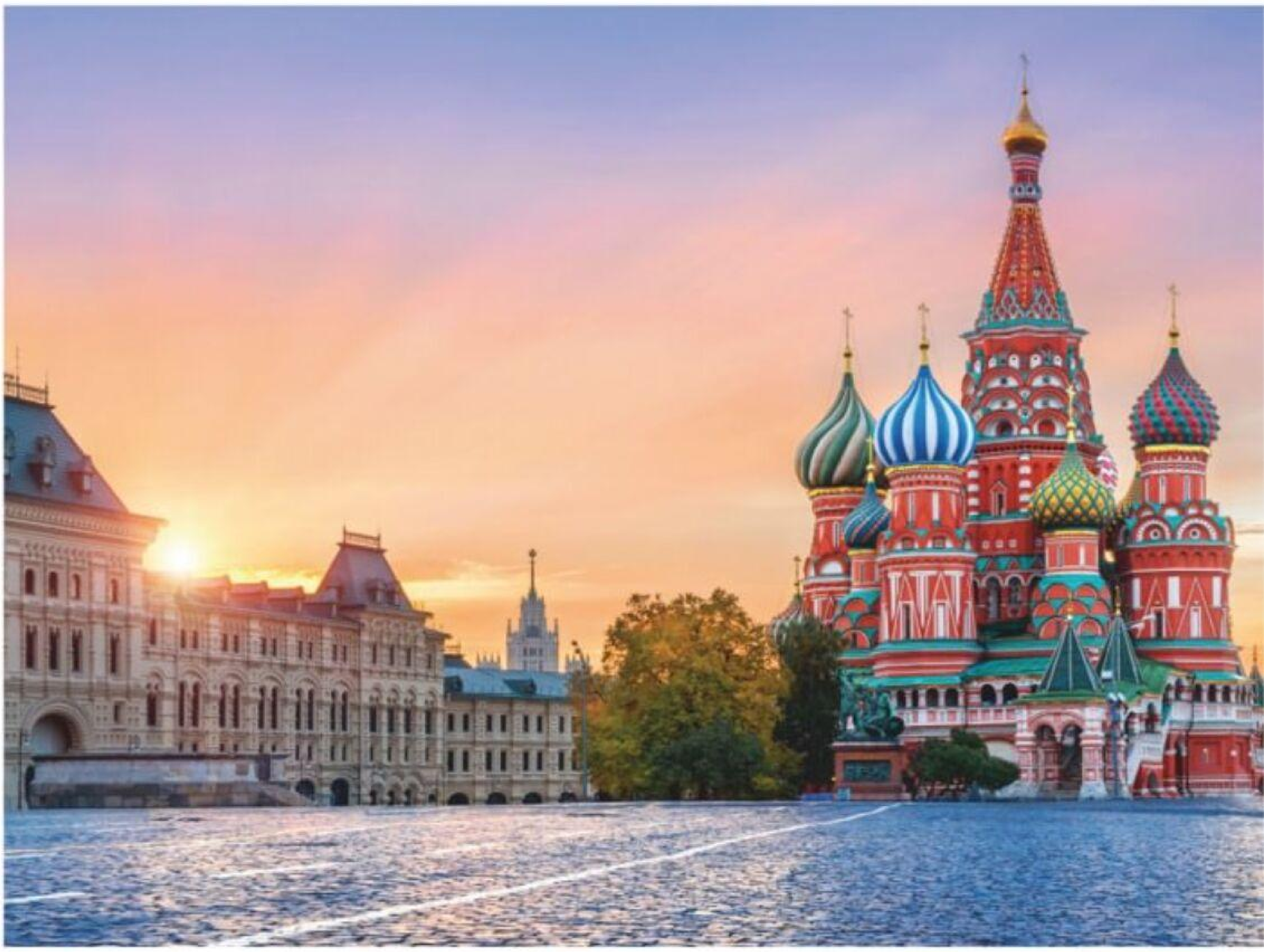
# ANTARCTICA

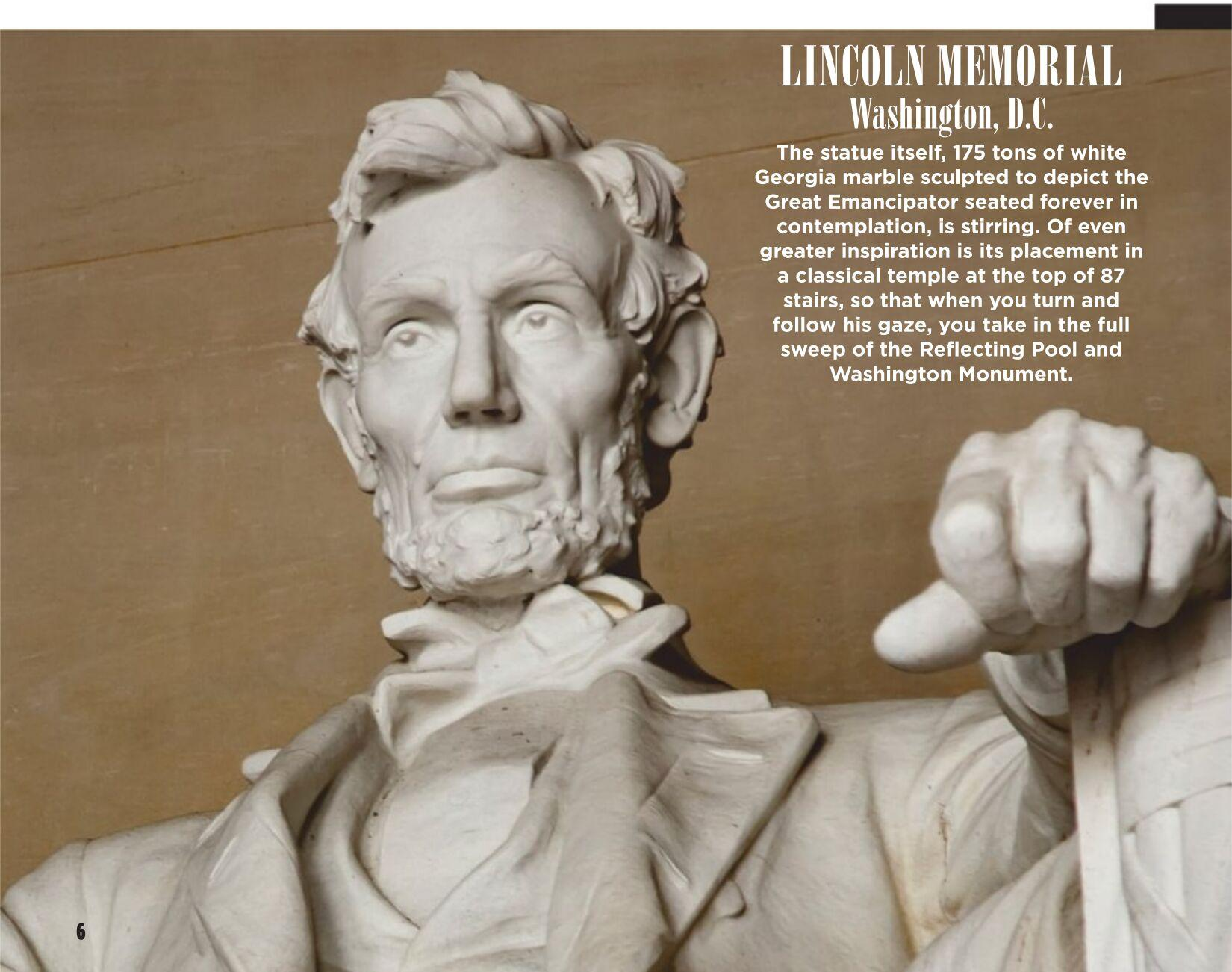
It's our coldest, driest, windiest continent. Almost all of it covered by a foot of ice, and hardly anything grows there. So why undertake the expedition-scale journey to stand upon it? Because all those daunting factors also make it an austerely beautiful land of glaciers, blue water, purple sunsets and humpback whales. And penguins! Like, *millions* of penguins!

# Red Square

## MOSCOW, RUSSIA

The Russian capital's most famous landmark has seen coronations, executions, riots, rock concerts and massive military parades since its 15th-century founding. Along the way, it has accumulated a dizzying variety of architecture, from the cubist austerity of Lenin's Tomb to the colorful, onion-shaped domes of St. Basil's Cathedral. Find a spot in the middle, turn a circle, and feel the history.





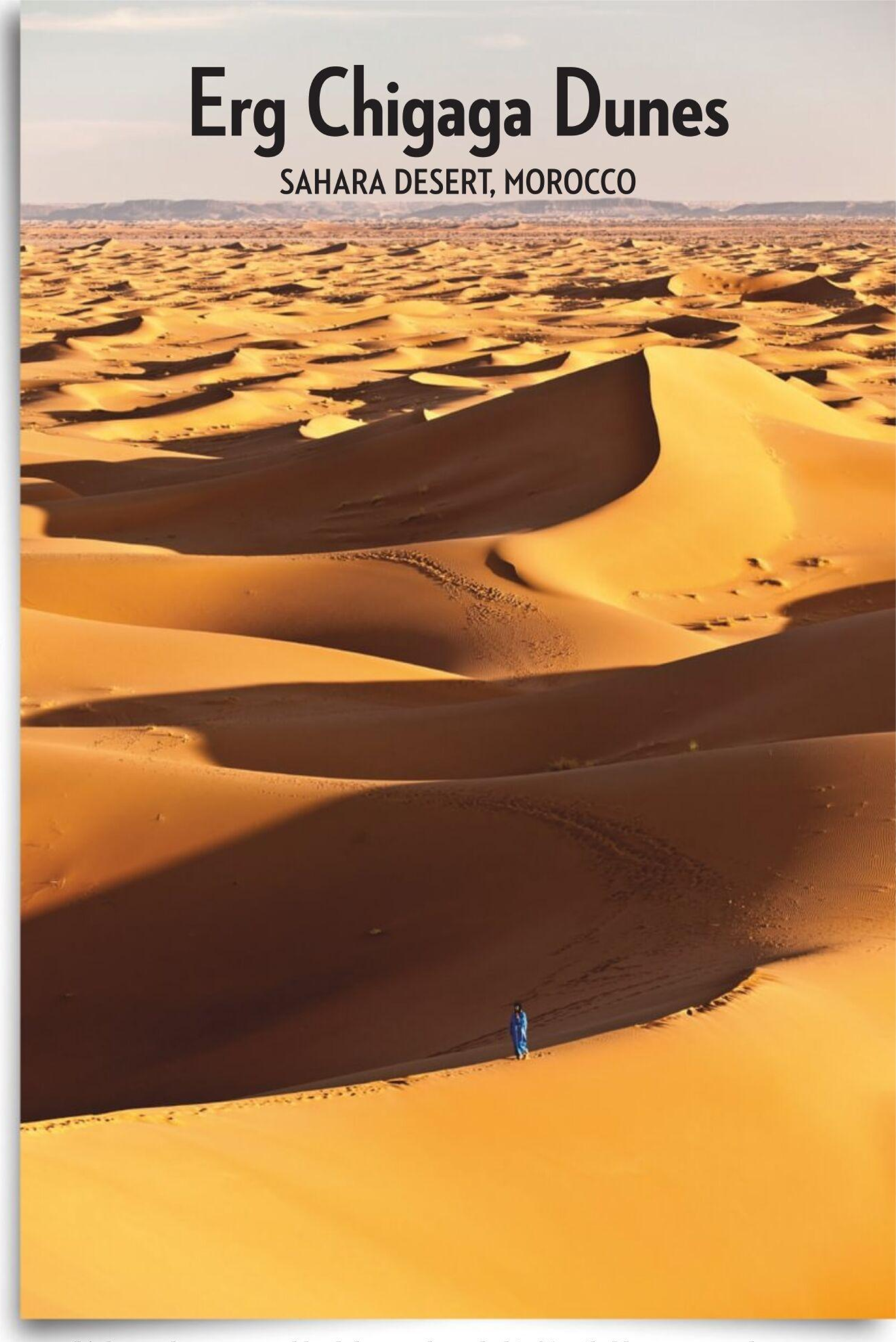
# LINCOLN MEMORIAL

## Washington, D.C.

The statue itself, 175 tons of white Georgia marble sculpted to depict the Great Emancipator seated forever in contemplation, is stirring. Of even greater inspiration is its placement in a classical temple at the top of 87 stairs, so that when you turn and follow his gaze, you take in the full sweep of the Reflecting Pool and Washington Monument.

# Erg Chigaga Dunes

## SAHARA DESERT, MOROCCO



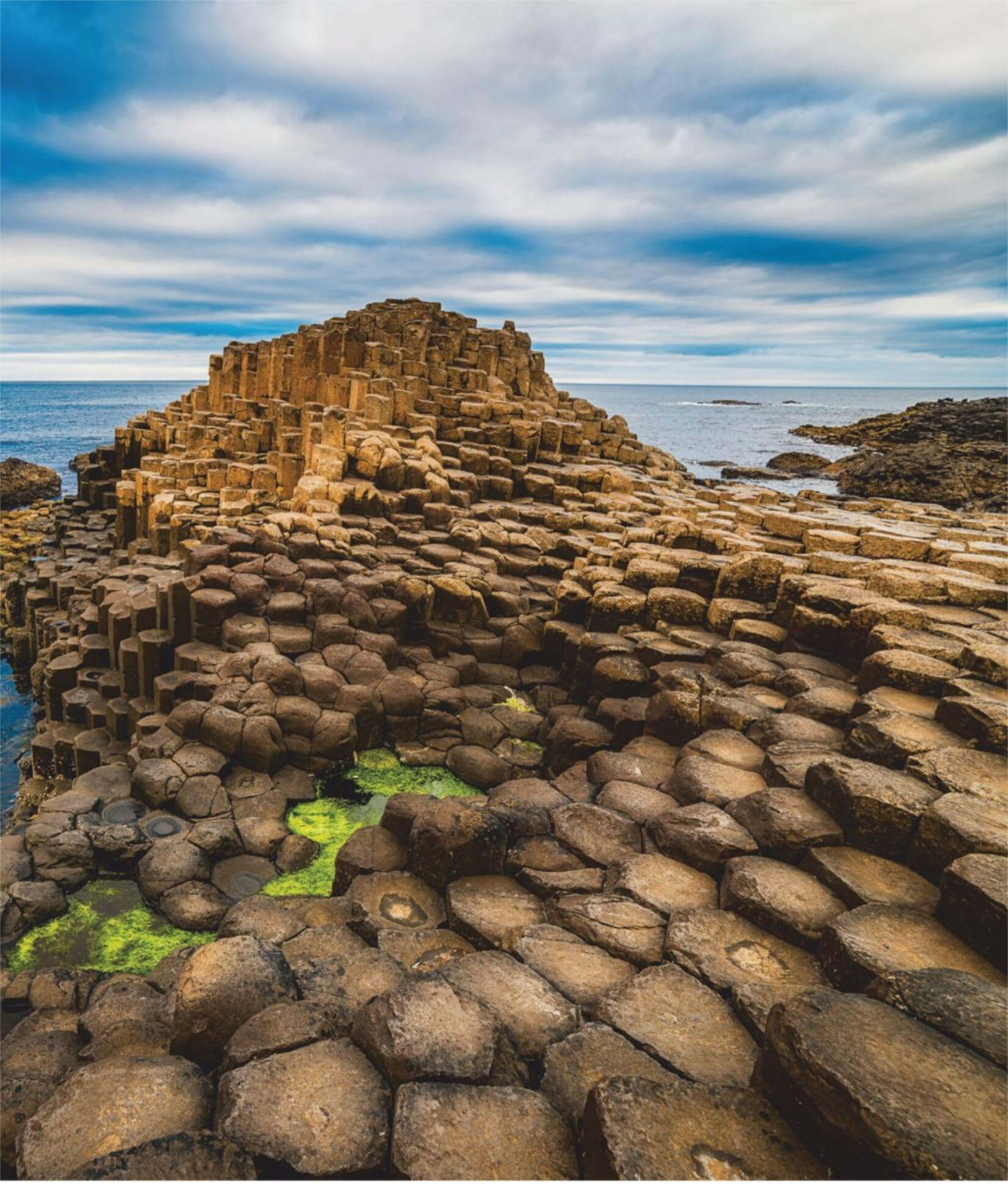
It’s best to let your camel lead the way through this 21-mile Moroccan wonderscape. Then you can relax and truly appreciate the skill with which desert winds have sculpted the endless tableau of undulating sand dunes, some rising to more than 150 feet. Staying overnight in a tent camp reveals the dramatically shifting shadows of sunset and the brilliance of stars overhead.

# Redwood National and State Parks

## CALIFORNIA

The tallest redwood species, *Sequoia sempervirens*, can live 2,500 years and reach taller than a 35-story building. They grow naturally only in damp coastal northern California into southern Oregon, so head there to stand on the forest floor and gaze upward...and upward...in awe. To also revere these giants from above, hop on the gondolas at Redwood National and State Parks.

# Giant's Causeway



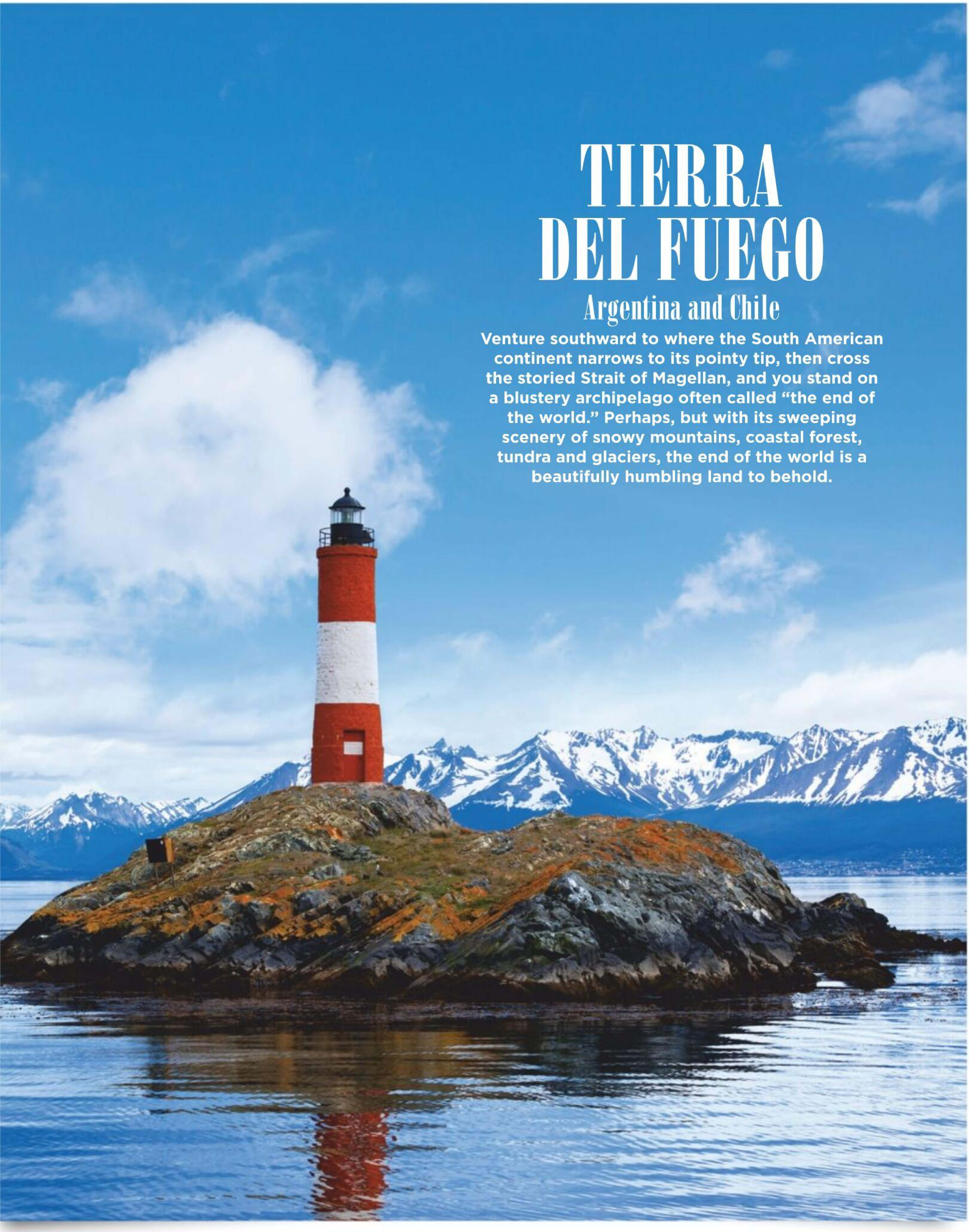
## NORTHERN IRELAND

**Geology explains that the 40,000 hexagonal basalt columns that stretch from cliffs down into the frigid sea were formed by volcanic activity 60 million years ago. Local legend holds that they are the stones of a causeway built by an Irish giant so he could fight a rival giant over the channel in Scotland. Regardless of which origin story you wish to believe, the melding of nature and geometry is striking.**

# TIERRA DEL FUEGO

## Argentina and Chile

Venture southward to where the South American continent narrows to its pointy tip, then cross the storied Strait of Magellan, and you stand on a blustery archipelago often called "the end of the world." Perhaps, but with its sweeping scenery of snowy mountains, coastal forest, tundra and glaciers, the end of the world is a beautifully humbling land to behold.



## ANGEL FALLS

### Venezuela

Imagine being the Kerepacupai Merú River, winding peacefully through the Venezuelan jungle when suddenly you flow over a precipice and plunge 3,212 feet to the lush rainforest below. At that height, Angel Falls is the world's tallest uninterrupted waterfall, and a magnificent sight. It's inaccessible by car, so the canoe trip to the roaring base of the falls only adds to the adventure.

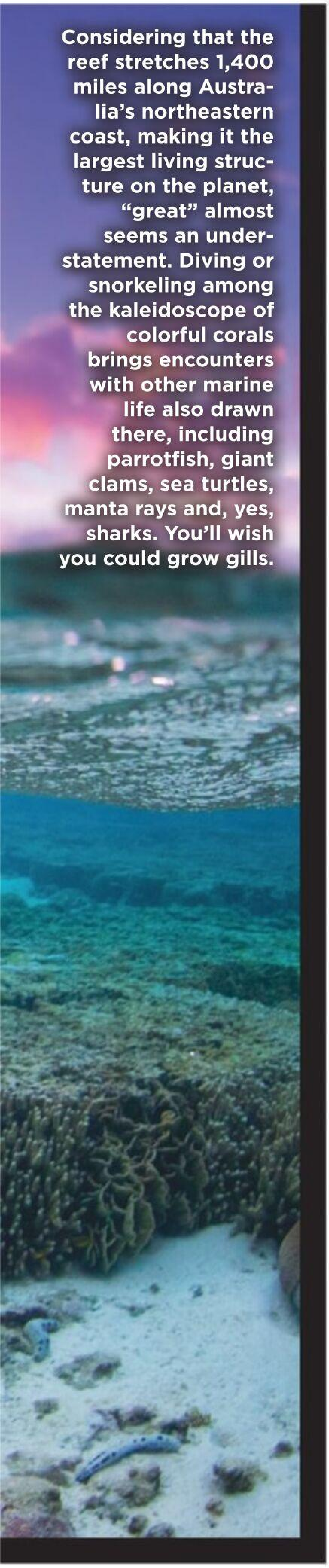
## Grand Bazaar

### ISTANBUL, TURKEY

You don't need to be a shopper to appreciate an old-world marketplace that covers 11 acres and 3,600 shops. Just wander its vaulted aisles appreciating that lively commerce has been conducted here since 1455. That said, if you're in need of leather goods, jewelry, a rug or just about anything else, sip apple tea with the shopkeepers and get to haggling.

# Great Barrier Reef

## AUSTRALIA



Considering that the reef stretches 1,400 miles along Australia's northeastern coast, making it the largest living structure on the planet, "great" almost seems an understatement. Diving or snorkeling among the kaleidoscope of colorful corals brings encounters with other marine life also drawn there, including parrotfish, giant clams, sea turtles, manta rays and, yes, sharks. You'll wish you could grow gills.

# Santorini

## GREECE

Whether you rely on feet, donkey or cable car to surmount the 657 steps that separate the Aegean's cobalt waters from the top of this famously beguiling island, you enter a postcard of whitewashed stone houses and churches connected by cobblestone alleys made for wandering. To witness a Santorini sunset is to imagine living a different sort of life there.

# GARDENS BY THE BAY

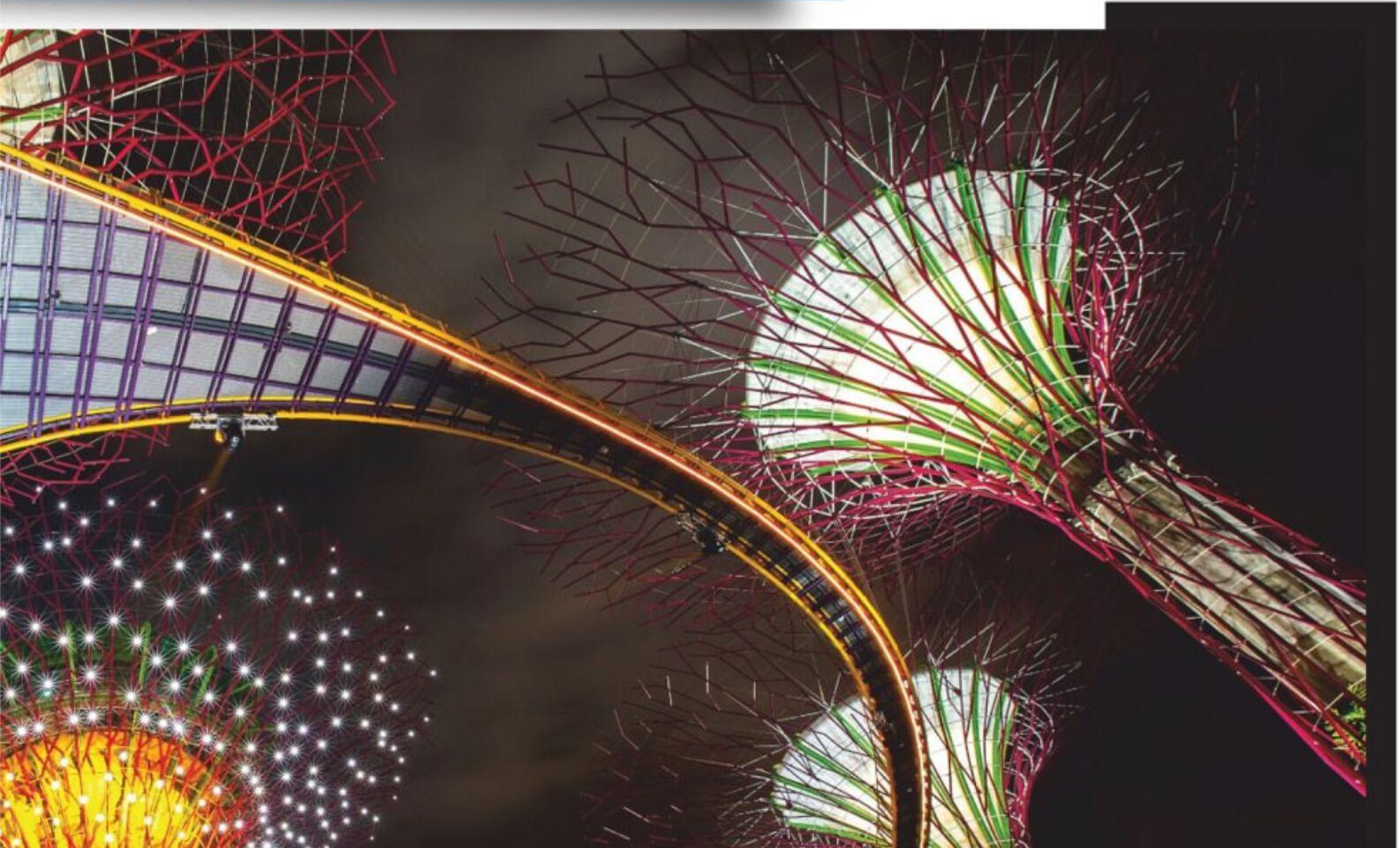
## Singapore

City beautification projects rarely succeed on this scale. The 260-acre tropical ecopark on the modern waterfront incorporates the world's largest greenhouse and 18 towering "supertree" structures linked by a 72-foot-high skyway. Walk it during the day for stellar garden canopy and skyline views. At night, the supertrees put on a dramatic light show that evokes the luminescent world of *Avatar*.

# Denali National Park

## ALASKA

**Larger than New Hampshire and accessed by only one partially paved road, this is a place to experience pure Alaska. Surrounding the highest mountain peak in North America are glaciers, vast tundra, clear lakes, and spruce and willow forests. Sharing the breathtaking landscape with you are grizzly and black bears, wolves, caribou, moose, Dall sheep and golden eagles. Wilderness calls.**



# Bora Bora

## FRENCH POLYNESIA

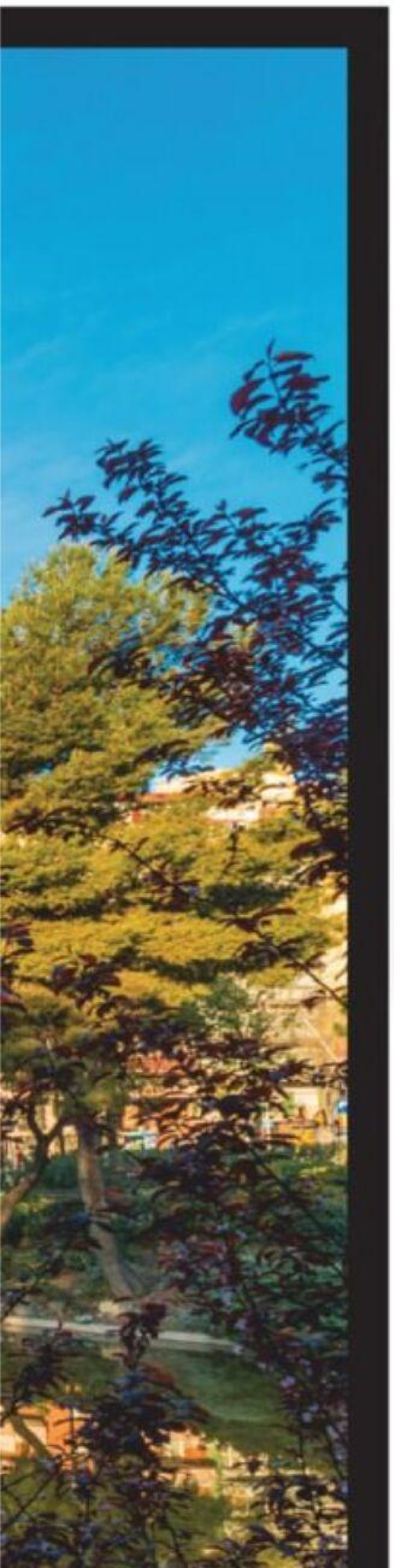
Asked to design paradise, you likely wouldn't come up with something this perfect: A lush, mountainous island ringed on three sides by a strip of barrier island, creating what many think is the planet's most beautiful lagoon. Toss in swaying palms, white sand beaches and thatch-roof accommodations perched over turquoise waters, and your imagination has definitely been outdone by nature.

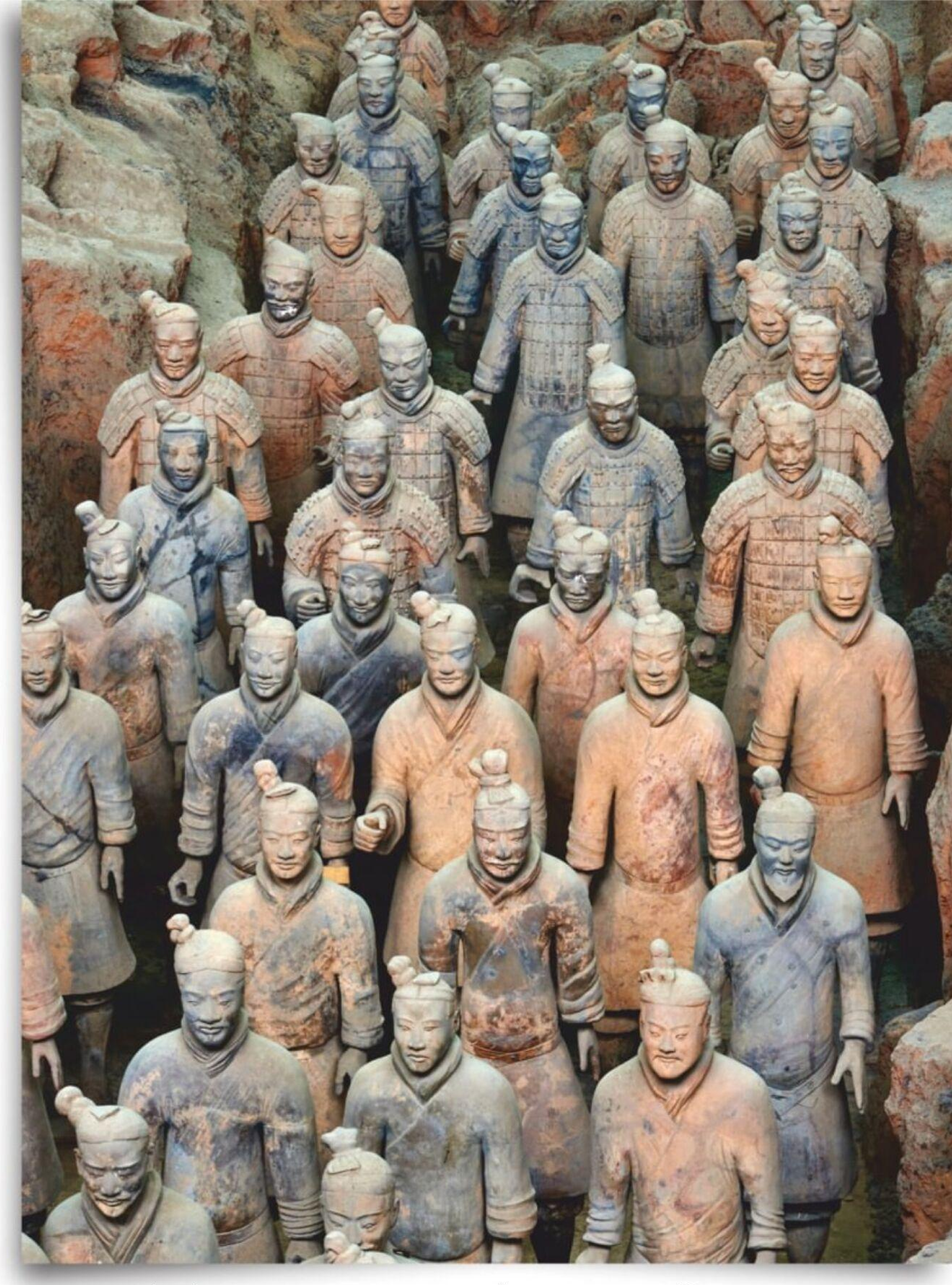
# SAGRADA FAMILIA

## Barcelona, Spain

Begun in 1882, construction of the world's largest unfinished Catholic church has crawled at a pace akin to medieval cathedrals. Everything else is radically different, as the Art Nouveau vision of late architect Antoni Gaudi has risen in 18 enchanting, anthill-like spires. "My client is not in a hurry," said Gaudi. Nevertheless, the last scaffold should come down in 2026. Hallelujah!

COURTESY FOUR SEASONS BORA BORA





# Terracotta Army Site

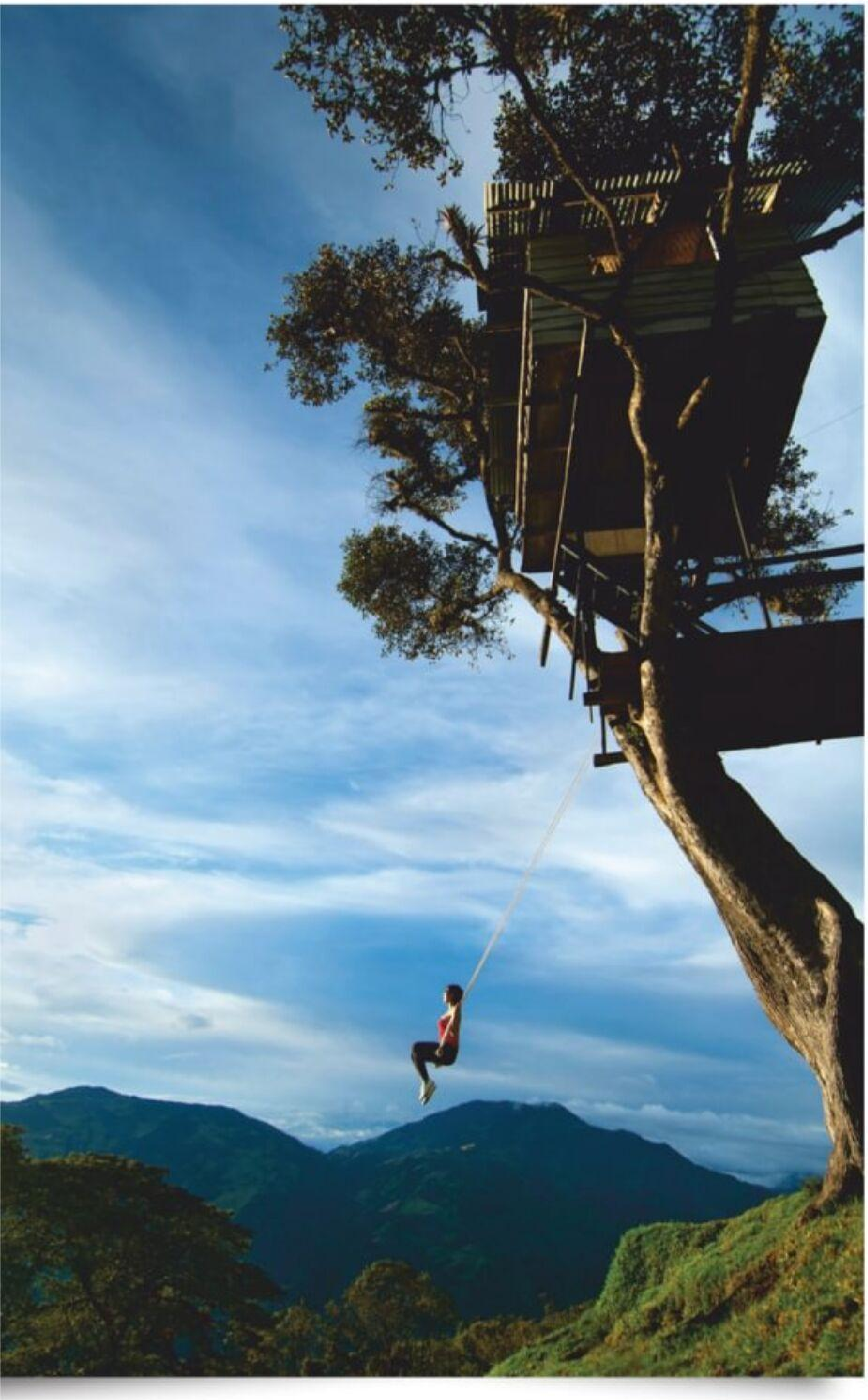
## SHAANXI PROVINCE, CHINA

**It's mind-boggling that a Chinese emperor who ruled 2,200 years ago had the wherewithal to plan his burial with 8,000 full-size clay warriors fired in kilns and arranged in formation. Two thousand are displayed where unearthed in 1974. A few platoons have toured the world on exhibit, but to study their incredible detail in mass is to believe they'll come to life and march away.**

# The Swing at the End of the World

## BANOS, ECUADOR

It's worth the trip deep into the Ecuadorian Andes just to view smoke-belching Tungurahua volcano. Adding to the vista is Casa del Arbol, a monitoring station perched in a cliffside tree. From that station dangle the long ropes of a playground-style swing that arcs over the precipice of a forested valley. Yes, visitors are allowed to use that swing. And yes, there's a seatbelt!



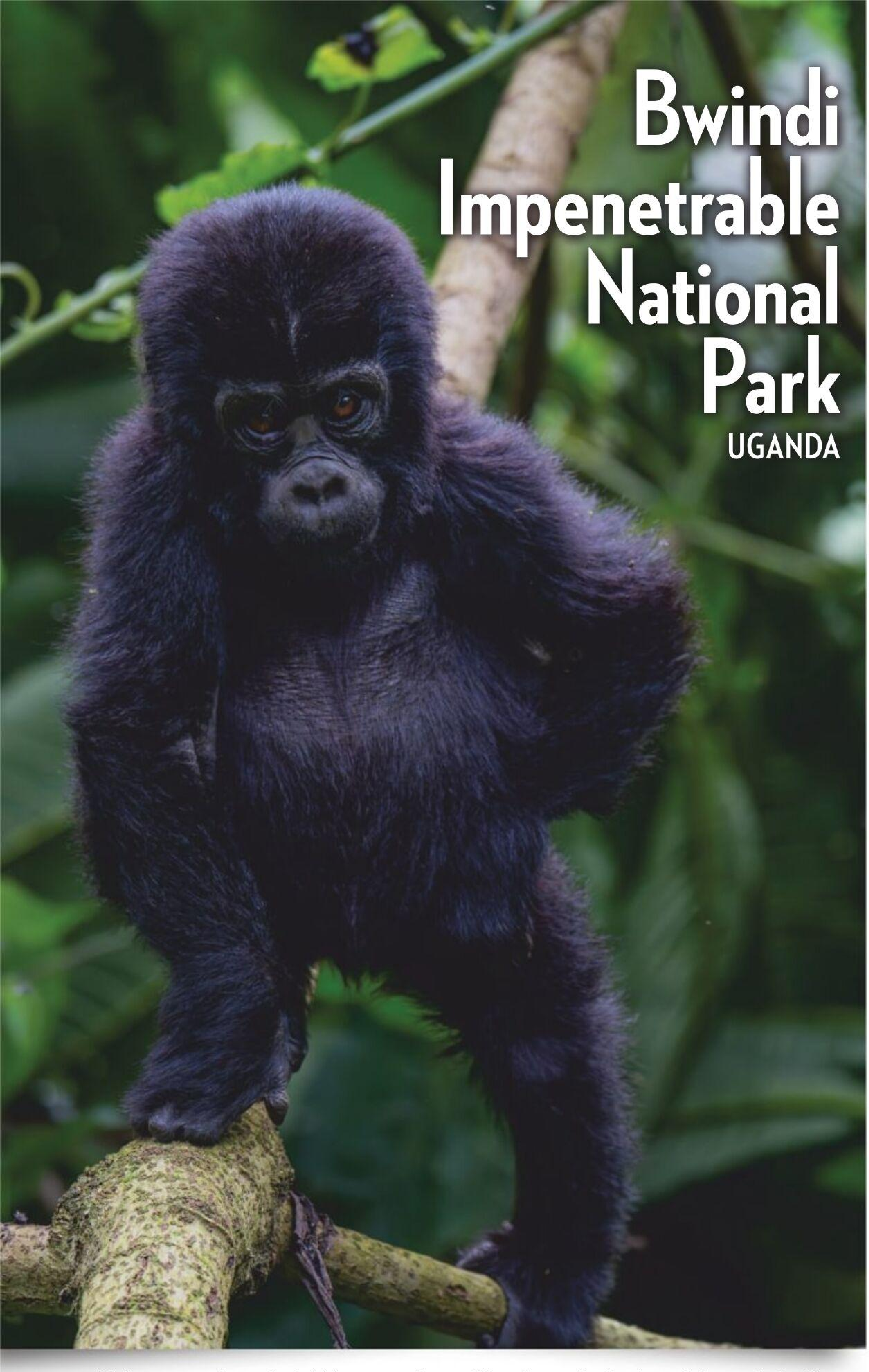
# Jiufen

## TAIWAN

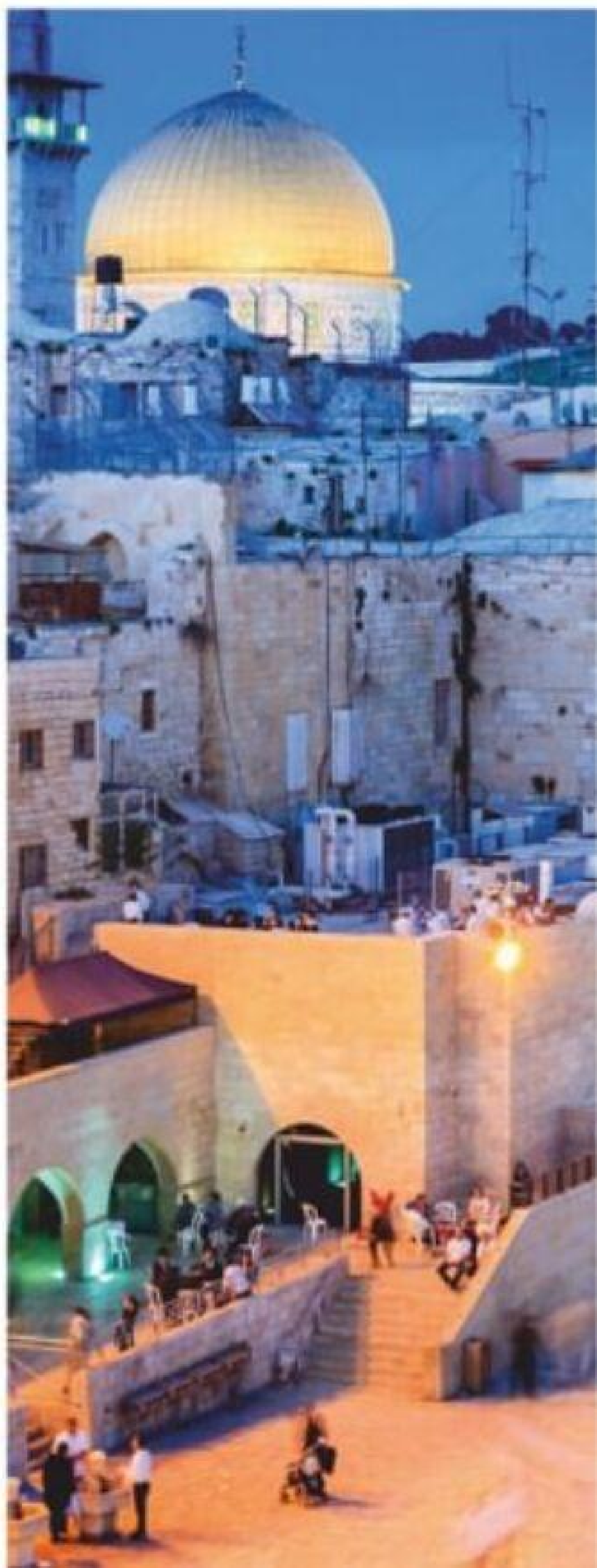
**America's former gold-mining towns tend to fall into dusty ruin. Jiufen was too pretty to fade away, especially after a 1989 film set there revitalized tourism. Old Street is the center of bustling Taiwanese quaintness, and any visit should include multi-level, wooden Amei Teahouse, which looks straight out of the animated film *Spirited Away* and provides wonderful views of the China Sea.**

# Bwindi Impenetrable National Park

## UGANDA



Of the approximately 1,000 mountain gorillas that exist in the wild, nearly half make their home within this protected zone. In groups of eight, permitted visitors are led by a knowledgeable park guide and two armed rangers into rugged cloud forest. The trek is worth it when the dense vegetation opens to reveal a group of females, babies and a hulking silverback that returns your gaze.



## THE LOUVRE

### Paris, France

You don’t need to be an “art museum person” to appreciate the history of a medieval royal palace turned into a public museum while the French Revolution still raged. Even non-art buffs are wowed as they find themselves viewing the *Mona Lisa*, *Venus de Milo*, *Liberty Leading the People* and more of the world’s greatest works of classical art.

## Wailing Wall

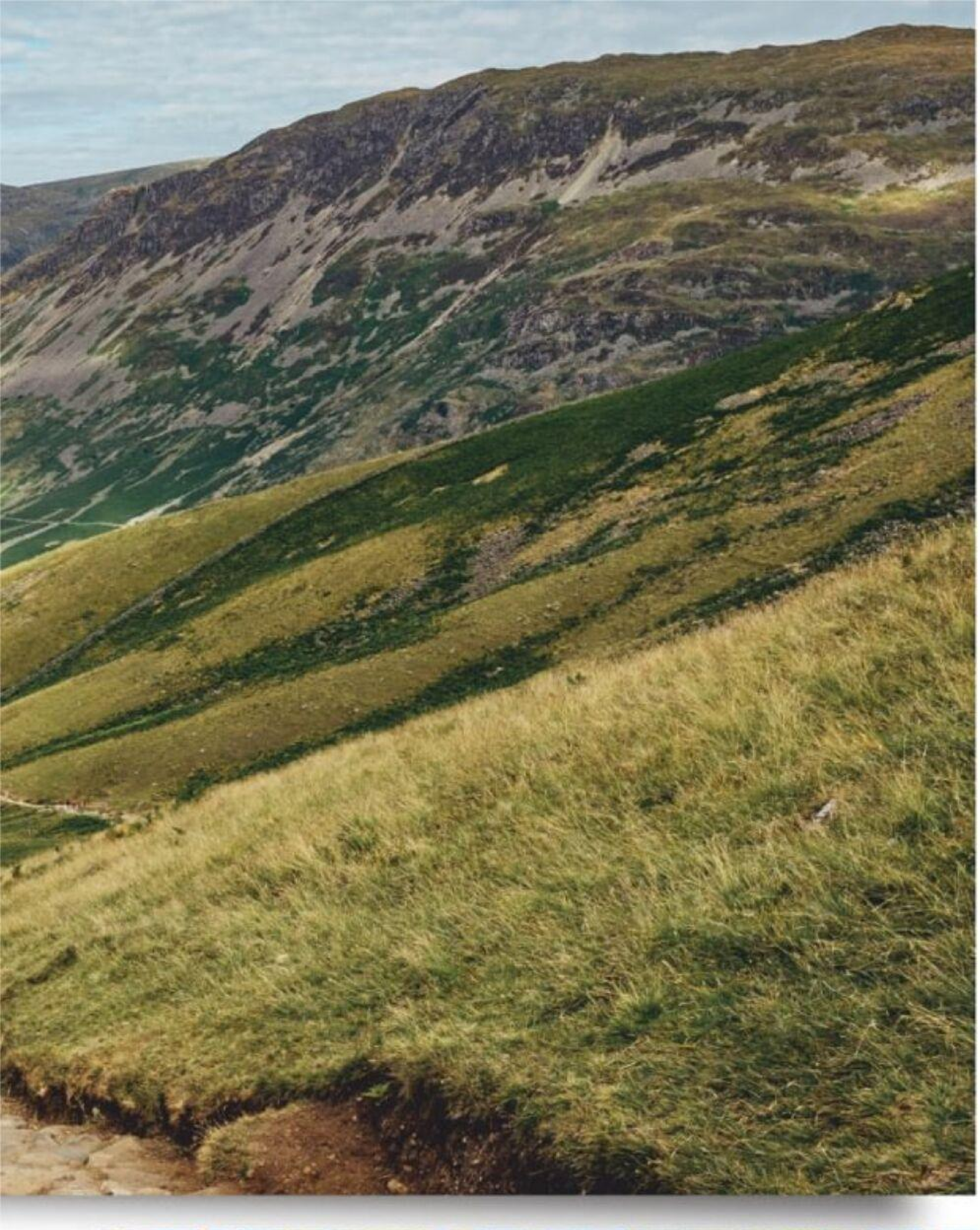
### JERUSALEM

The ancient retaining wall of Jerusalem’s Temple Mount is a source of dispute among faiths that lay claim upon it, affecting even international politics. For those who seek to stand before it and feel the fervent prayers of the faithful, however, it can deeply reinforce how so much history and tradition can exist in one spot, and spark hope for a more peaceful future.

# Everglades

## FLORIDA

**The Seminoles called it Grassy Water, Spanish explorers the Lake of the Holy Spirit. Today, the Everglades' 1.5 million acres of sawgrass marsh, cypress swamps and mangrove forests still keep a huge swath of southern Florida wild. Whether you explore via boardwalk trails or an airboat tour, look for herons, flamingos, river otters, Florida panthers, and of course, massive alligators.**



# Lake District

## ENGLAND

**If you want to climb England's highest mountain, head for this upland region on the northwest coast famous for glacier-carved lakes, peaks and moorlands. Even if you don't summit Scafell Pike for stellar views that extend to Scotland and Wales, heather-scented valleys offer quaint villages and a 15th-century castle. "The loveliest spot man hath ever found," judged no less than poet William Wordsworth.**

# MONARCH BUTTERFLY BIOSPHERE RESERVE

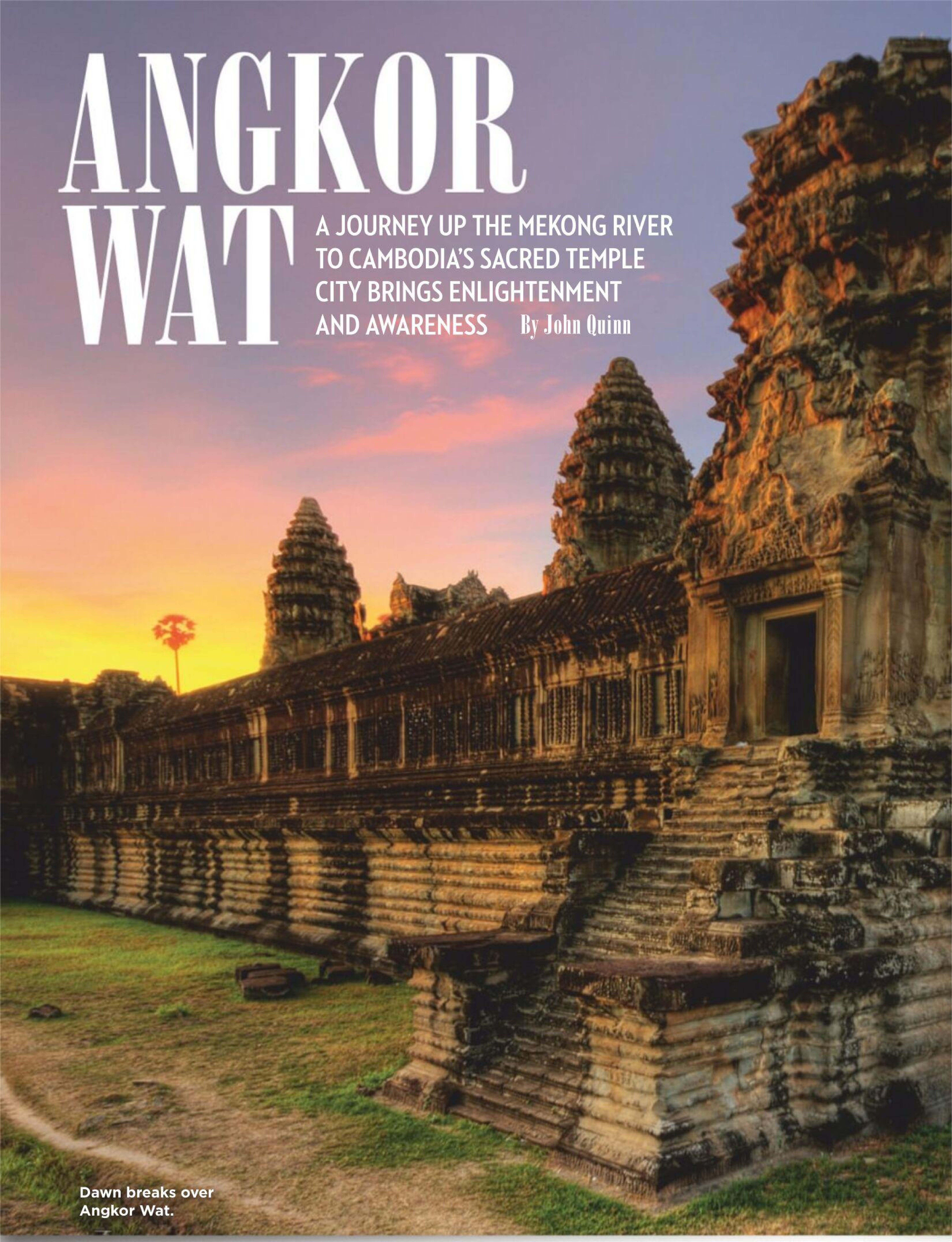
## Mexico

**To view more butterflies in one place than you've seen in your life, hike through this pine-forest ecoregion northwest of Mexico City where almost the entire population of North American monarch butterflies migrates for the winter. What do hundreds of millions of monarchs look like? Like orange, fluttering clouds in flight, or when clustered, like entire trees made of butterflies.**

# ANGKOR WAT

## A JOURNEY UP THE MEKONG RIVER TO CAMBODIA'S SACRED TEMPLE CITY BRINGS ENLIGHTENMENT AND AWARENESS

By John Quinn



Dawn breaks over Angkor Wat.

Sunrise at Angkor Wat is a mystical moment. Each year, tens of thousands of visitors arrive on the very early side and, before entering the Hindu-Buddhist grounds, find vantage points to witness the live-action postcard in all its glory. The two most popular days are the equinoxes, when the blazing sun hovers atop the lotus flower–shaped center tower like a holy eucharist.

Constructed more than 900 years ago, Angkor Wat is the centerpiece of a 154-square-mile archaeological park that includes dozens of temples and the ruins of a once-great civilization. At its peak, the former Khmer capital equaled the size of London and had a population of one million, making it one of the world's largest pre-industrial urban centers. For almost 400 years, the city served as the political and cultural heart of the Khmer Empire until, inexplicably, it was abandoned.

My journey to Cambodia's national treasure begins in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. I visited the country 32 years earlier as a backpacker, before the United States normalized diplomatic relations with its former enemy. Back then, hotels cost $4 a night and the only reliable tourist information came from a copy of *Lonely Planet*. This trip will be decidedly different. I'm booked on the Aqua Mekong, a boutique cruise ship from Aqua Expeditions that will travel upriver and into Cambodia, making stops at various points of interest along the way.

Landing at Tan Son Nhat airport, I glimpse familiar imagery of Southeast Asia. Murky green- and plum-colored rice paddies. Corrugated tin roofs bunched together like a dropped deck of playing cards. The Mekong comes into view, its wide waters dark brown like a baseball diamond after a rain. I also see things I expect, but don't really want to see—huge apartment buildings and the 1,513-foot Landmark 81 tower, the city's tallest skyscraper.

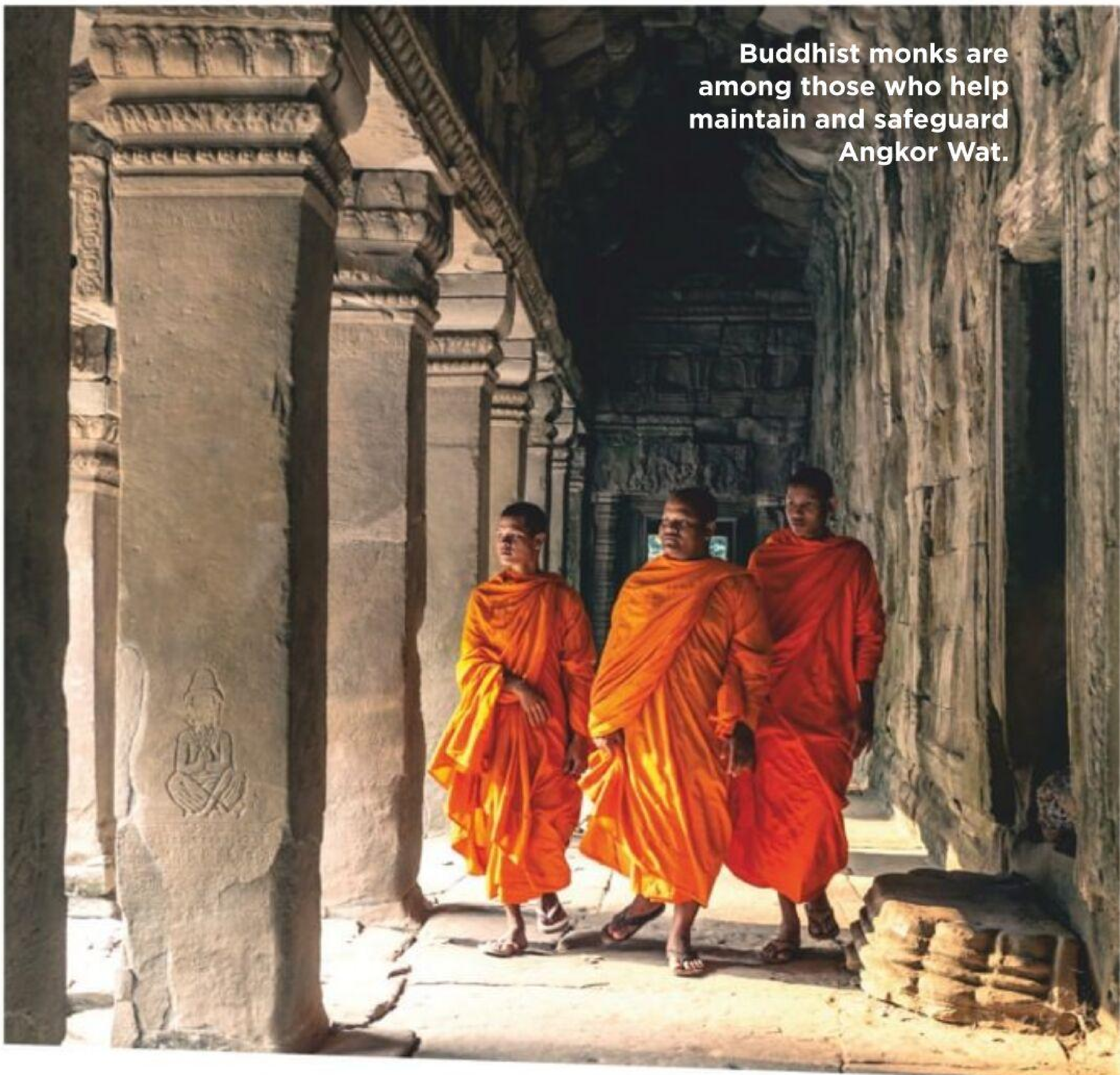
The jungle has added its own impressive architecture to Angkor Wat.

Working hard to catch up with regional rivals Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, the city formerly known as Saigon has come a long way since my last visit, when the tallest building was the six-story Rex Hotel. Good news for people whose average monthly salary is $700, not so good news for foreigners like myself nostalgic for the days before the internet and globalization.

I'm staying on the 30th floor of a ritzy hotel, but the streets of downtown Ho Chi Mihn City are as hot, frenetic and fascinating as I remember, maybe even more so. With just one day to explore, I opt for the greatest hits: the Jade Emperor Pagoda where Barack Obama visited in 2016, the War Remnants Museum, a steaming bowl of pho at a neighborhood joint. Strolling back to the hotel in the evening, I notice a difference between now and three decades ago. Back then, the city quieted at dusk save for the rustle of trees and the putt-putt of the odd bike-rickshaw. Today the city charges full neon into the wee hours.

After pulling away from My Tho Port the next day, the 20 guests aboard the Aqua Mekong are summoned to the lounge for a meet-and-greet and safety briefing. Equal parts elegant and swanky with a heavy emphasis on service and immersive daily expeditions, the ship caters to an exclusive clientele looking for a high-low travel experience. My new friends include a group from the Hamptons, a young tech couple from Seattle, a retired journalist-turned-amateur-photographer, a billionaire and his second wife, and an A-list actress and her third husband. For the next eight days, we'll head north up the Mekong in search of adventure and discovery on the way to Angkor Wat, a place shrouded in mystery since it was "discovered" by French naturalist Henri Mouhot in 1860. Adding to the Agatha Christie cruise motif, none of the suites have automatic locks.

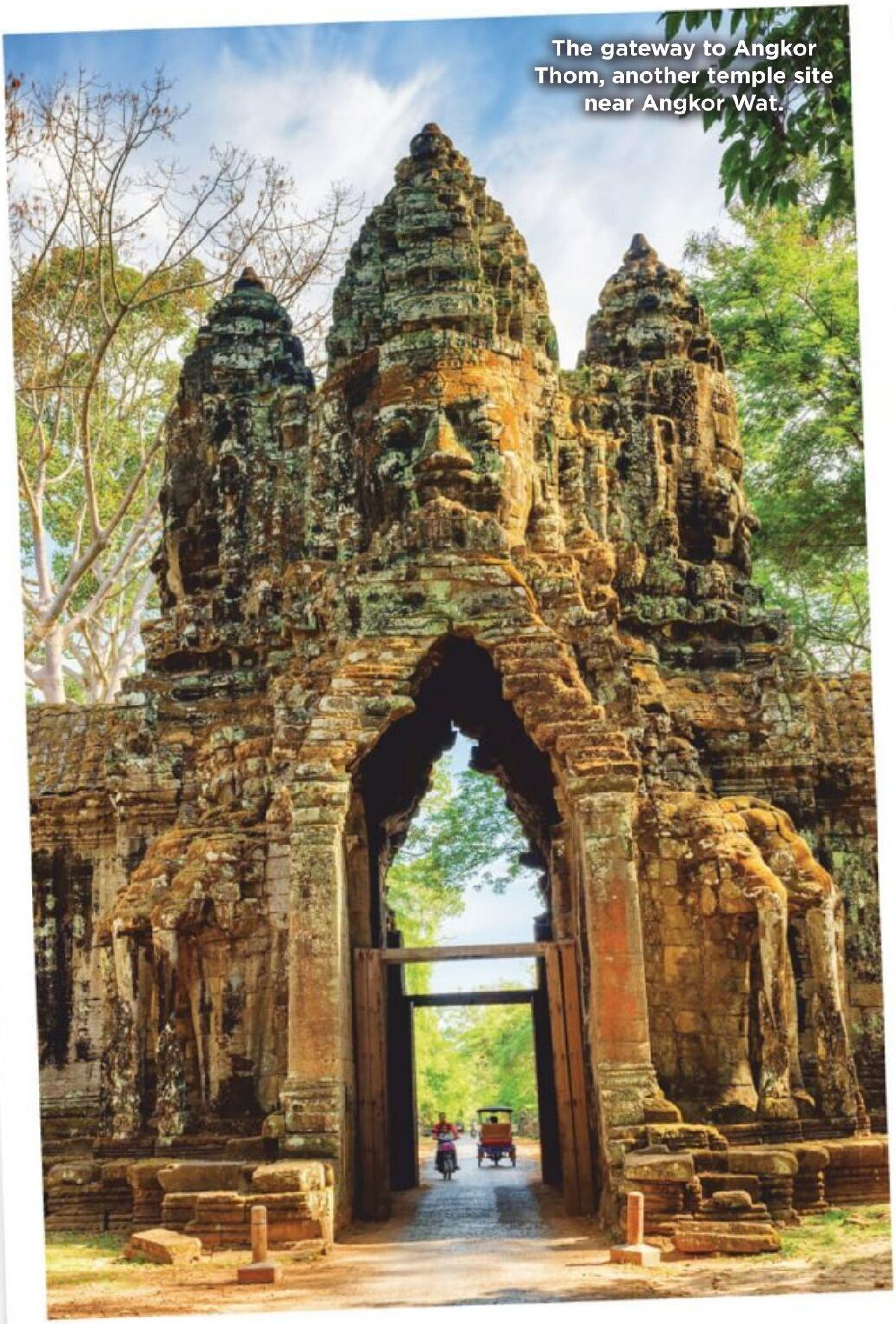
We wake up the next morning in Sa Dec, an historic river village famous as the setting of Marguerite Duras' 1984 risqué autobiographical novel *The Lover*. Skiffs drop us off at the town's market, a mile-long clogged artery where locals on mopeds zip from stall to stall to haggle over the day's provisions. I trod past pots of flowers, freshly gutted fish, jars of spices, roosters being plucked, bean sprouts spilling out of woven baskets. "Want some long-tail chicken?" inquires one of our Vietnamese guides. He points to a woman skinning a small animal I can't identify. "Rat," he explains with a wry smile.



Buddhist monks are among those who help maintain and safeguard Angkor Wat.

Two expeditions are offered each day, one after breakfast and one after lunch, so at 3 p.m., willing guests are back on a skiff to check out some tributaries. A guide points out an enormous Buddha statue in the distance. We pass families dozing inside skinny sampans, then slow down to watch men working a fish farm. Finally, we tie up and walk along an embankment dotted with rural homes, each little more than a three-sided wooden box on stilts. The front is exposed save for a curtain. At one such home, a small crowd is waiting for us, including a few teenage boys wearing colorful silk outfits. Some start playing instruments while two others don a bisected dragon costume and perform an acrobatic dance that draws gasps and cheers.

For the next several days, each shore expedition proves to be part revelation, part celebration. During one bike ride through a dusty village, we happen upon a wedding and are invited to eat, drink and take selfies with the guests. We visit a silk-making operation, meet young monks, watch men standing over furnaces making soy noodles for $10 a day, and drink sundowner cocktails on a beach. One afternoon after we cross into Cambodia, I climb the 500 steps to Oudong Temple. It being Tarzan hot, children offer to fan tourists on the long way up for tips.


The gateway to Angkor Thom, another temple site near Angkor Wat.

The suites aboard the ship have wi-fi, but thankfully, no televisions. Each night I eagerly read up on Angkor Wat. Archaeologists estimate that it took some 300,000 people and 6,000 elephants about 40 years to build it. UNESCO named it a World Heritage Site in 1992, and the

year before the pandemic, 6.6 million tourists visited the site. Originally built as a Buddhist temple, it later became Hindu. The more I learn, the more I want to know.

Upon disembarking at Siem Reap, I check into my hotel and then jump in a tuk-tuk bound for Angkor Wat, only 15 minutes away. I arrive at high noon, with the sun at its most unforgiving. Perhaps my poor timing explains why few tourists are hampering my first impression of the colossal wonder. Built of gray sandstone, Angkor Wat offers a ghostly aura against its jungle-green setting. The entrance is dramatically long and unshaded, forcing all newcomers to wonder how it possibly could have been constructed by hand in such sweltering conditions.

Inside, I'm struck by the realization that this is unlike any other place I've ever visited. The Colosseum, the Vatican, Sagrada Familia—they don't begin to compare. Perfectly straight corridors extend silently in every direction, yet there are no guards, no roped-off areas, no signs explaining anything. Statues are headless, decapitated by thieves long ago. Thousands of intricate bas reliefs, such as the one paying tribute to King Suryavarman, the builder of Angkor Wat, adorn the walls. Further inside, steep steps invite the intrepid to climb and explore. In small moments, and in totality, it's spectacular.

After an hour of wandering, I find myself back outside, staring at another temple where a solitary monk sits in the doorway. I take a seat to catch my breath and contemplate. Earlier on the trip, I met a young mother who made beautiful clay pots for 25 cents each. When I tried to buy one for $20, she insisted I take it as a gift. Such is the generosity of the human spirit when a person is happy and at peace. "We don't carry anger," a monk had replied when asked about the Khmer Rouge's campaign of genocide that sent Cambodia into madness in the 1970s. "Cambodians only care about the present and the future."

What, then, is the future here? There are many theories—war, disease, political factors—about why Angkor Wat was abandoned 500 years ago. But the growing consensus is that it was localized climate change. By studying the rings of trees in the area, experts theorize that a prolonged drought forced the entire population to give up its home and march 200 miles to what is now Phnom Penh. At least they had somewhere to go. 🌍

# DUBROVNIK

## Croatia

Visiting in 1929, playwright George Bernard Shaw declared, “If you want to see heaven on earth, come to Dubrovnik.” A 1991 siege by Yugoslavian forces made that inadvisable, but today the Adriatic port city again beckons. To stroll atop medieval stone walls that deliver fantastic views of ubiquitous red-tile rooftops, then to bask in the cross-cultural mix at an outdoor cafe, is to be charmed.

## OKAVANGO DELTA

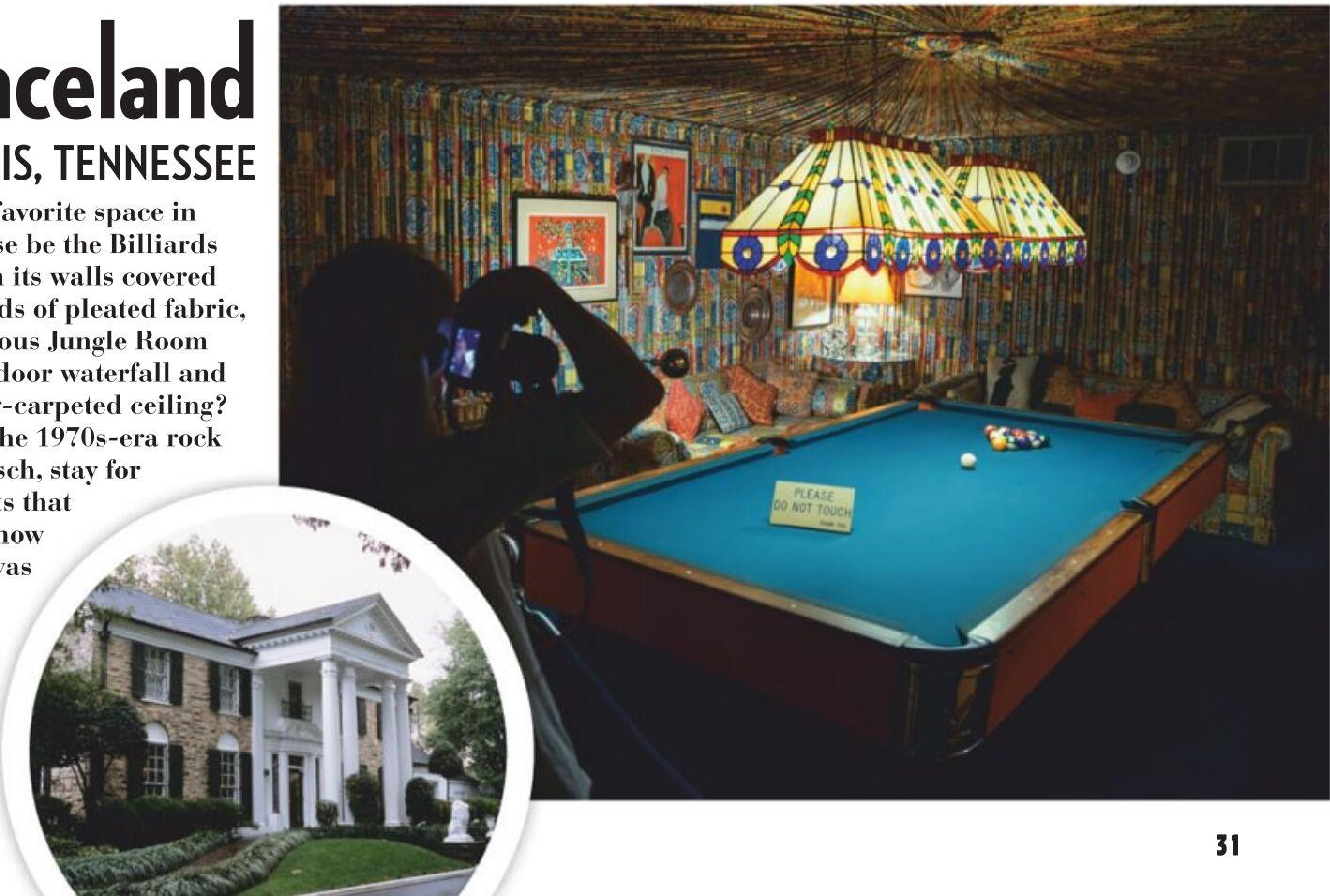
### Botswana

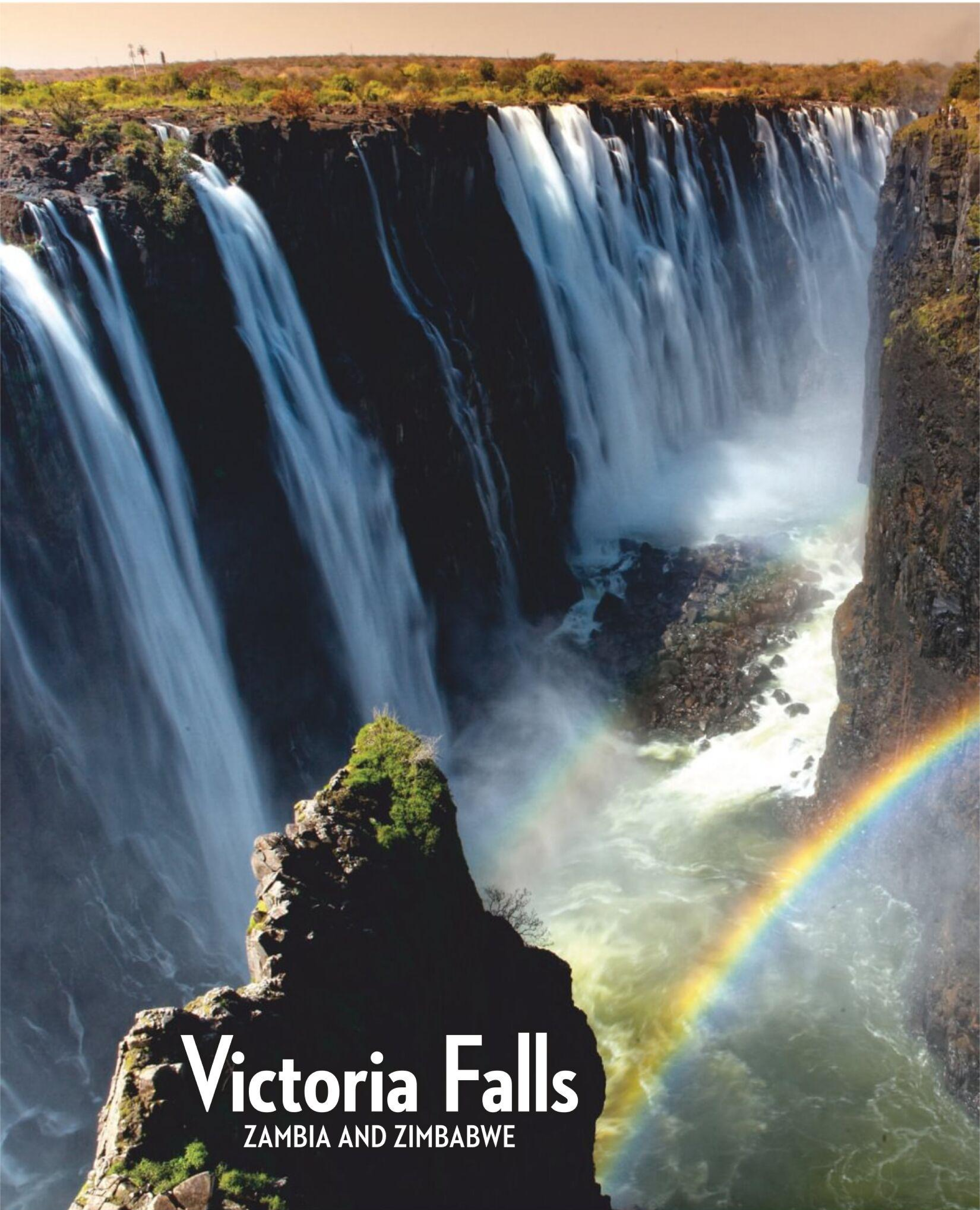
**Safari by water? That is indeed the way to go in this extensive inland delta formed by seasonal river flooding that turns an otherwise arid area into one of Africa's greatest concentrations of wildlife. Board a shallow-bottomed boat that glides through the wetland maze and into partially dry Moremi Game Reserve to check off the Big Five, including the novel sight of swimming elephants.**

## Graceland

### MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

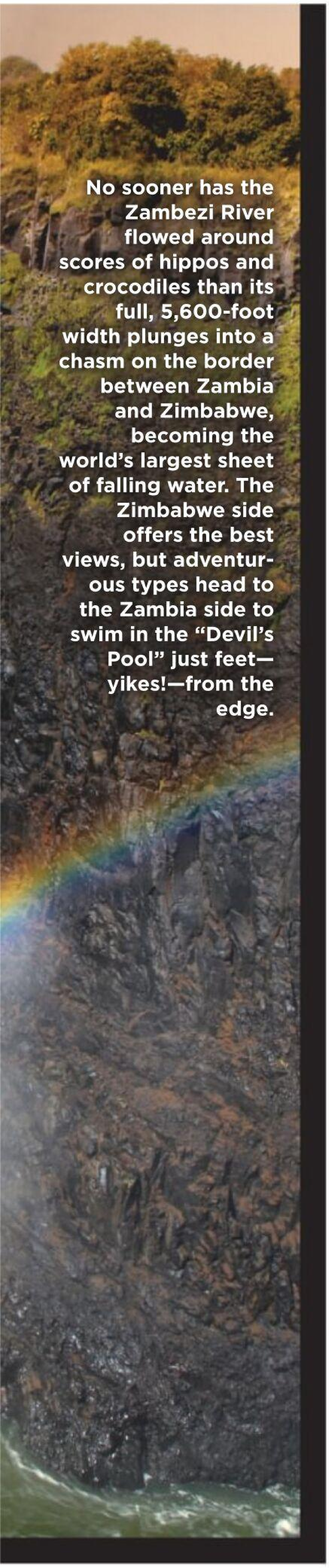
**Will your favorite space in Elvis' house be the Billiards Room with its walls covered by 400 yards of pleated fabric, or the famous Jungle Room with its indoor waterfall and green shag-carpeted ceiling? Come for the 1970s-era rock 'n' roll kitsch, stay for the exhibits that show just how meteoric was Presley's rise from poverty to worldwide superstardom.**



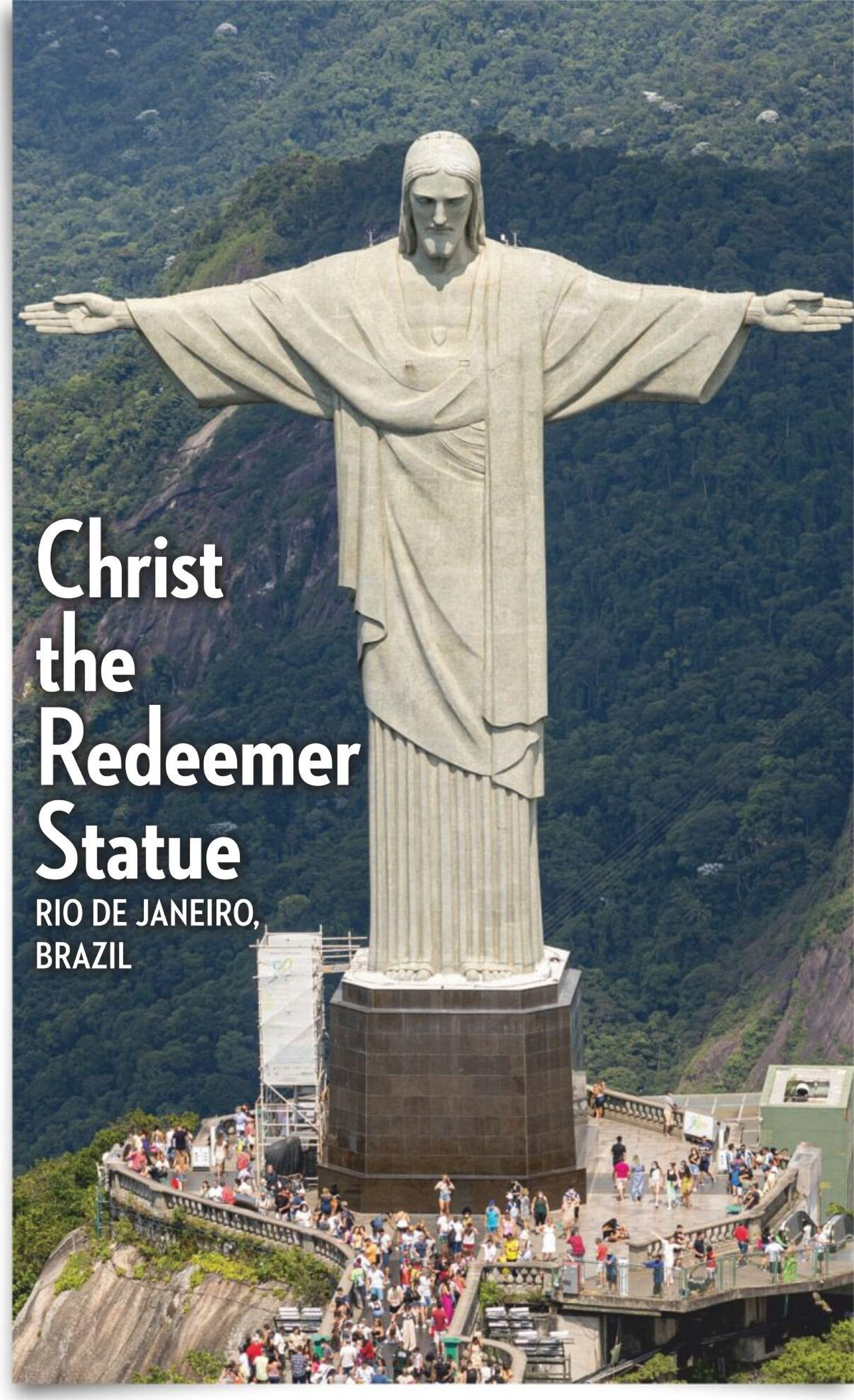


# Victoria Falls

## ZAMBIA AND ZIMBABWE



No sooner has the Zambezi River flowed around scores of hippos and crocodiles than its full, 5,600-foot width plunges into a chasm on the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe, becoming the world's largest sheet of falling water. The Zimbabwe side offers the best views, but adventurous types head to the Zambia side to swim in the "Devil's Pool" just feet—yikes!—from the edge.



# Christ the Redeemer Statue

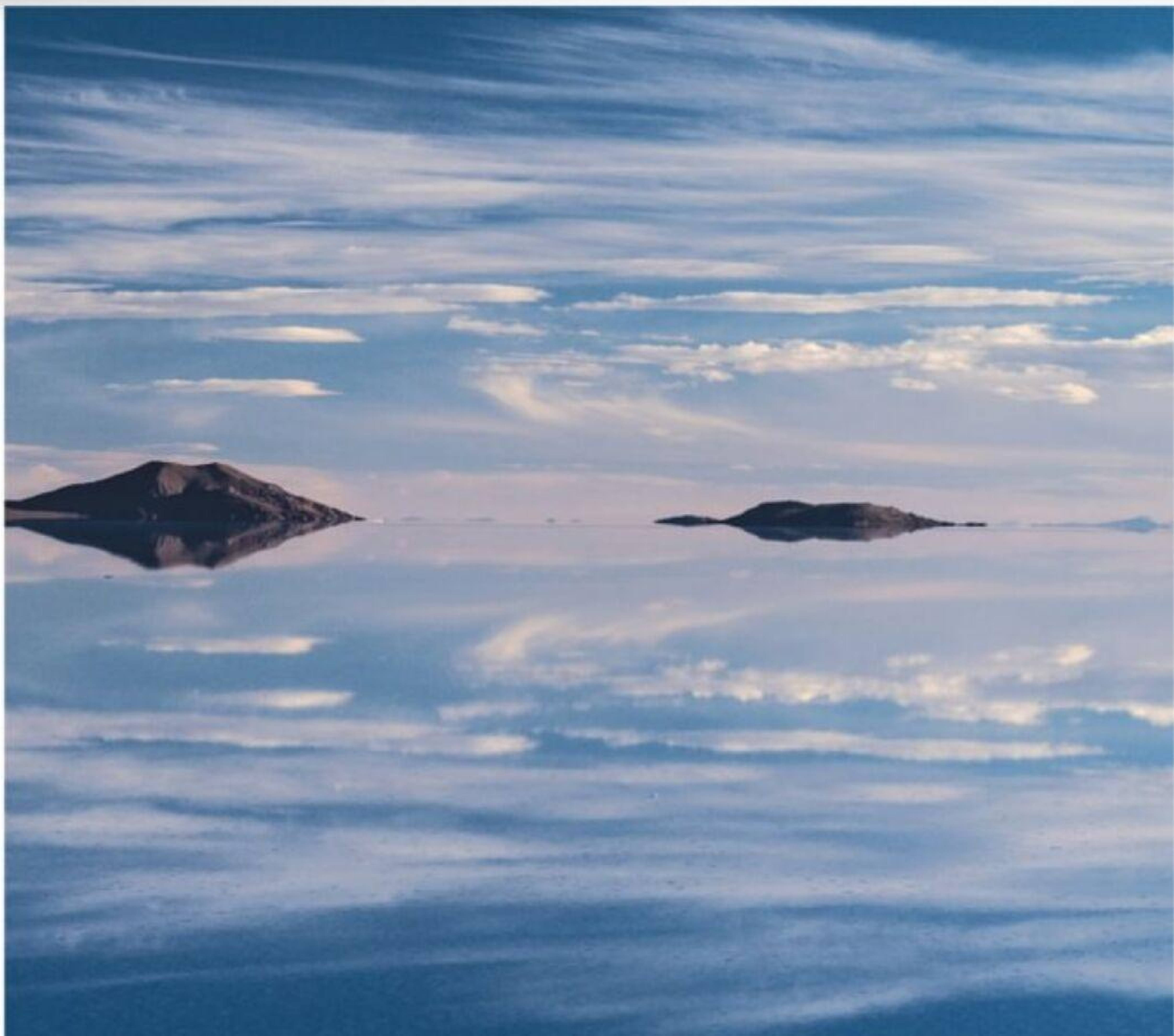
## RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

You don't need to be a believer to appreciate the grandeur of a 125-foot statue of Jesus made even more dramatic by its outstretched arms and position at the pointed peak of Corcovado Mountain overlooking Rio. Constructed by a team of sculptors and engineers between 1922 and 1931, it holds the distinction of being the world's largest Art Deco-style sculpture.

# UYUNI SALT FLAT

## Bolivia

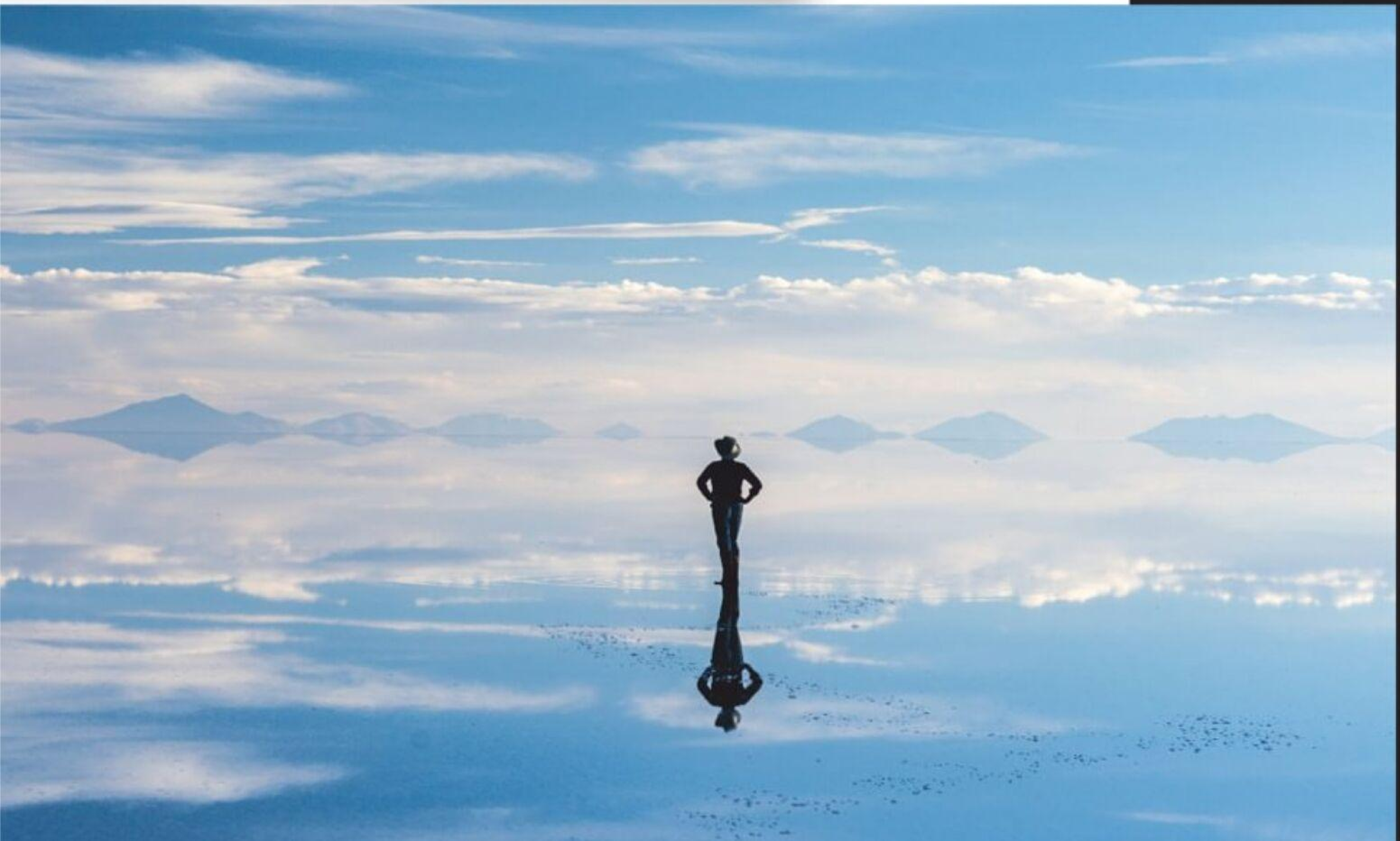
**Exploring the world's largest salt flat (4,000 square miles!) during the dry season allows visitors to roam the thick, quilt-patterned crust far and wide by vehicle. The wet season (December to April) limits exploration, but when nearby lakes spill a thin layer of water over the salt, the resulting mirror-like reflection is one of the most awe-inspiring sights on the planet.**



# Venice Grand Canal

## ITALY

**Whether you travel Venice's largest channel along its 2.4-mile, curving path from the railway station to St. Mark's Square by gondola or water taxi, you'll experience sensory overload amid watercraft gliding between palazzos that have enjoyed this view for centuries. Don't try to answer why one of the world's most beautiful cities was built in a lagoon—just enjoy the ride.**



# Madriu-Perafita-Claror Valley

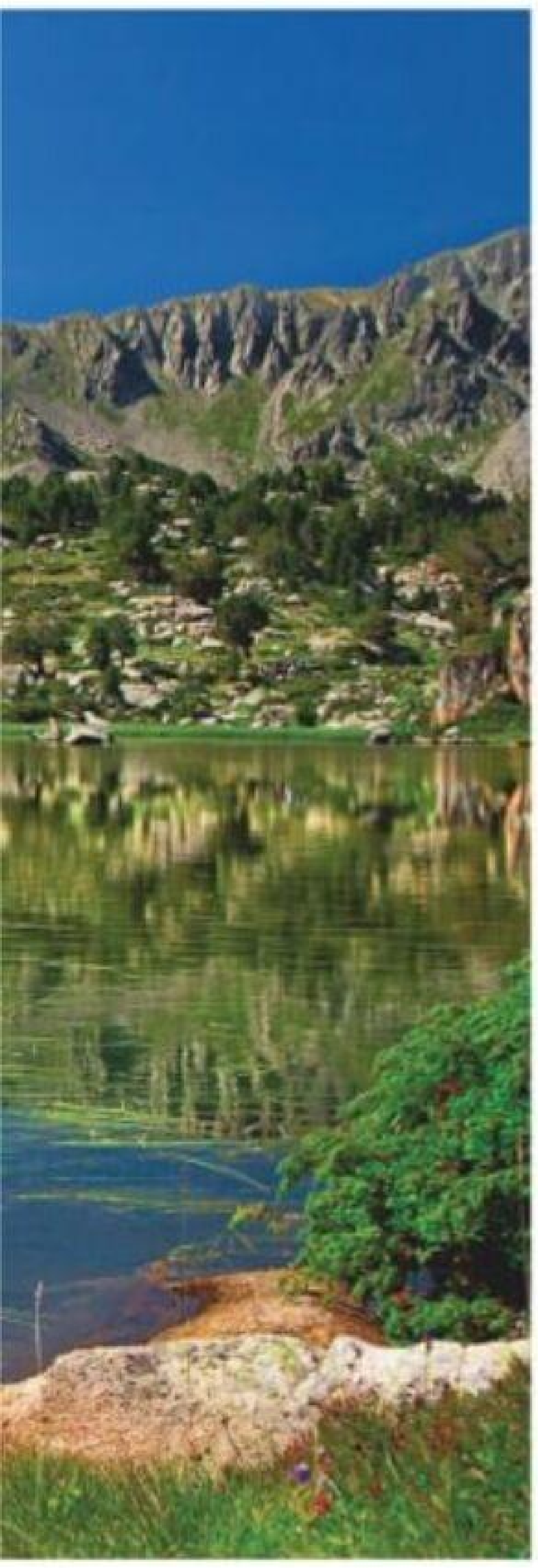
## ANDORRA

Want to get away from it all? First find your way to Andorra, a 181-square-mile country wedged into the Pyrenees mountains between France and Spain. Then lace up your hiking boots and venture into this even more secluded alpine valley. Your reward? A spectacularly untouched landscape of rugged mountains, lush forests and crystal-clear waters straight out of a storybook.

# MONGOLIAN STEPPE

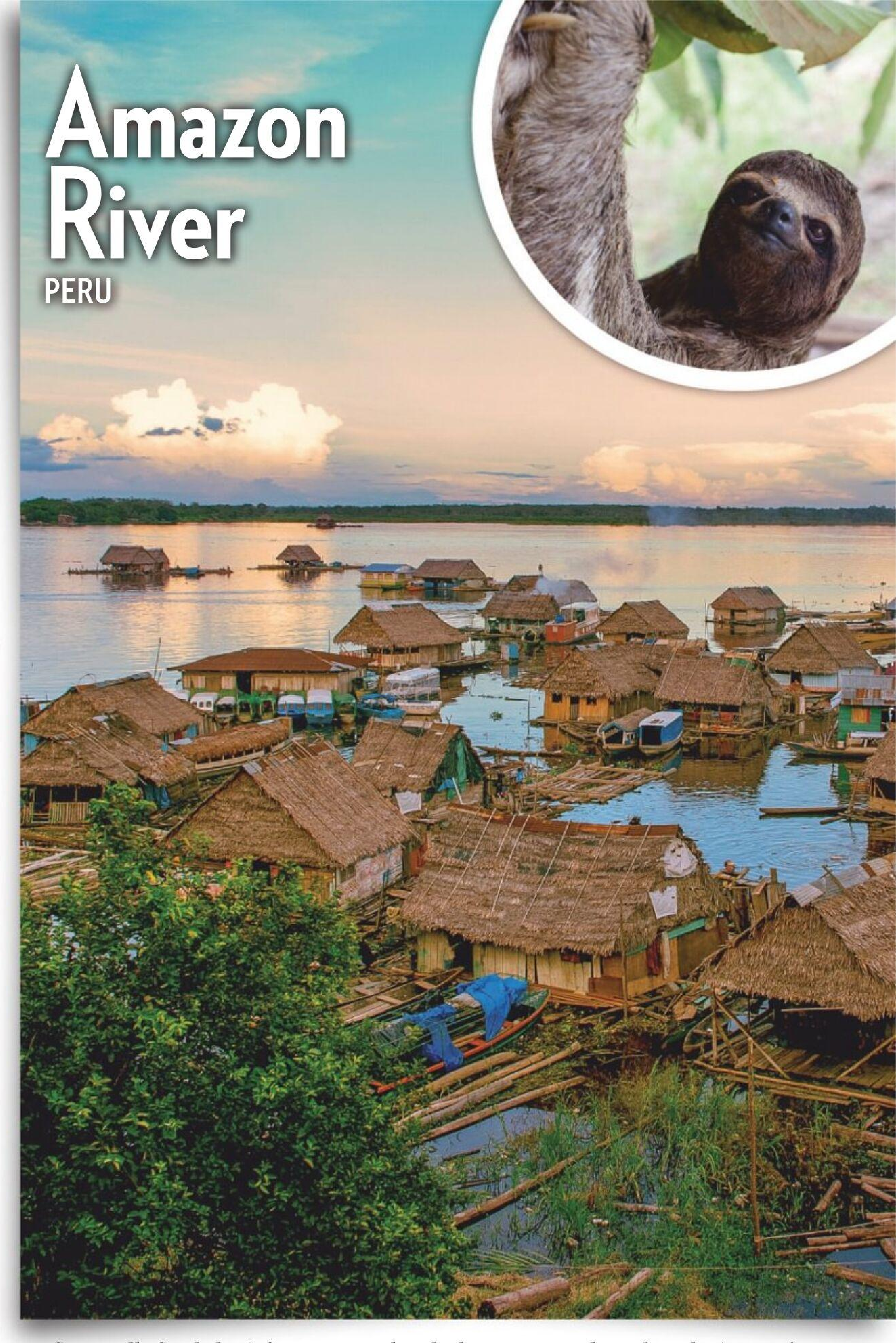
## Mongolia

You'll want to experience the seemingly endless grasslands that cover most of Mongolia in a manner similar to resident nomads. Camp under the stars and slumber in a "ger" felt tent. Wake to the sound of yaks and perhaps even the golden eagles trained to hunt on behalf of their doting handlers. Then mount a Mongolian pony and immerse yourself in the stunning scenery.

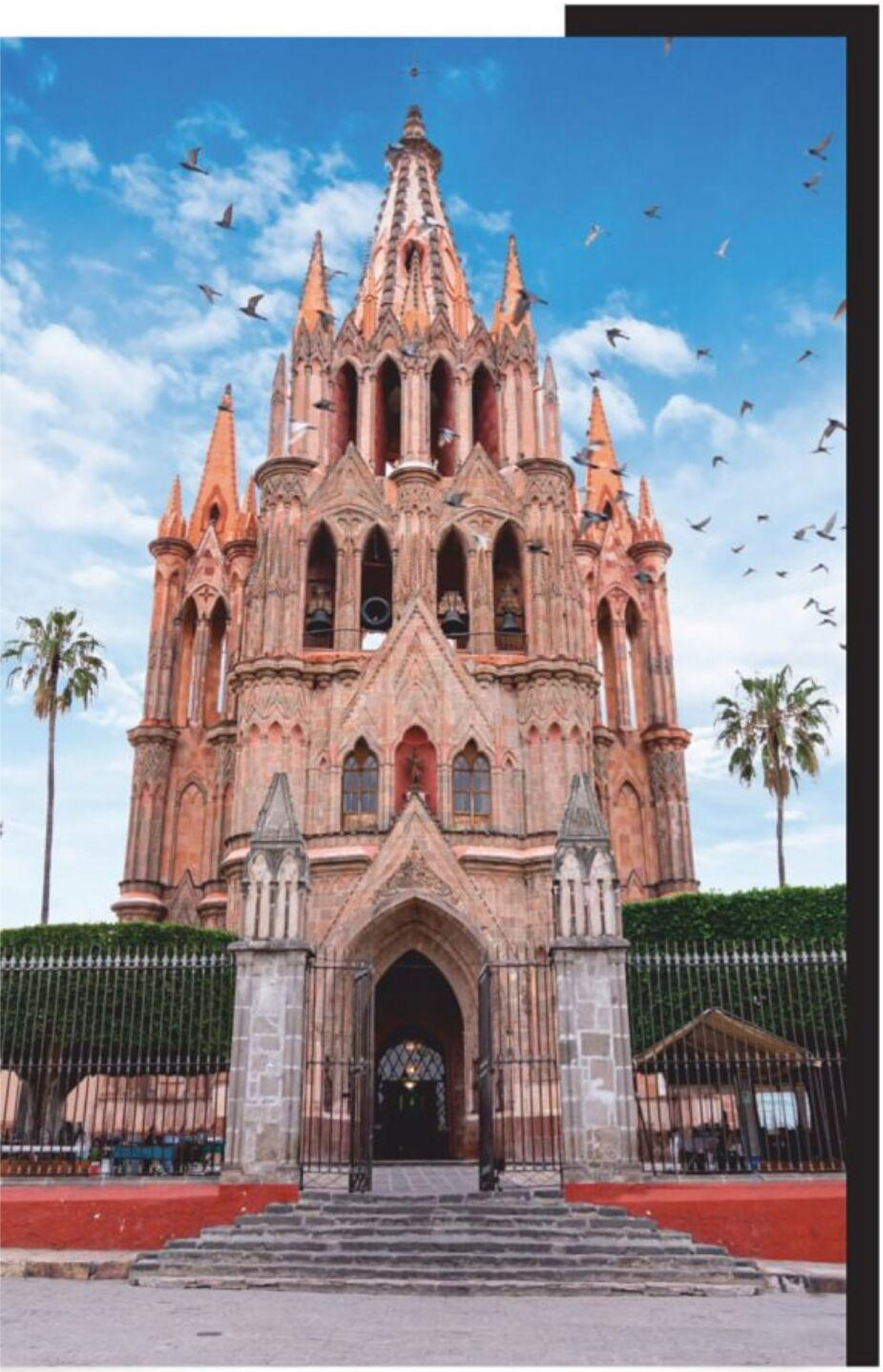


# Amazon River

PERU



Seasonally flooded rainforest means that the best way to truly explore the Amazon's 8,000-square mile Pacaya-Samiria Natural Preserve is aboard a small-ship cruise ship or other boat. It also means incredible biodiversity, so keep your eyes out for pink river dolphins, manatees, red-faced spider monkeys, giant otters, sloths, scarlet macaws and other charismatic species that thrive in such an ecosystem.



# Parroquia de San Miguel Arcangel

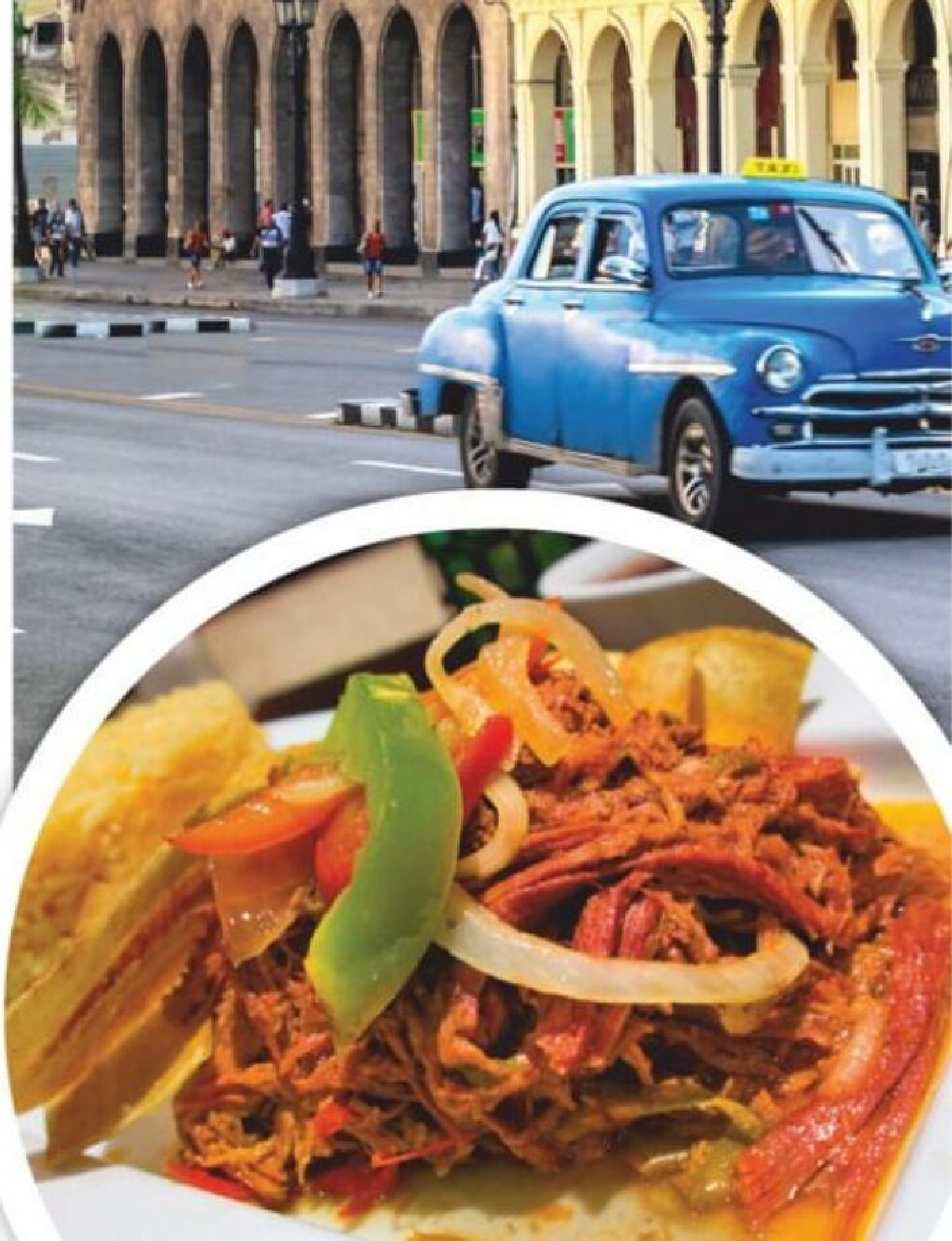
## SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE, MEXICO

**The colorful, artsy town of San Miguel de Allende would be worth visiting even without the 17th-century parish church at its heart. But what a sight it is, with pink-hued, wedding-cake spires added by stonemason Zeferino Gutiérrez in the late 1800s. At times when visitors are allowed inside, deepen the experience by viewing the revered Christ of the Conquest statue made with the use of cornstalks and orchids.**

# OLD HAVANA

## Cuba

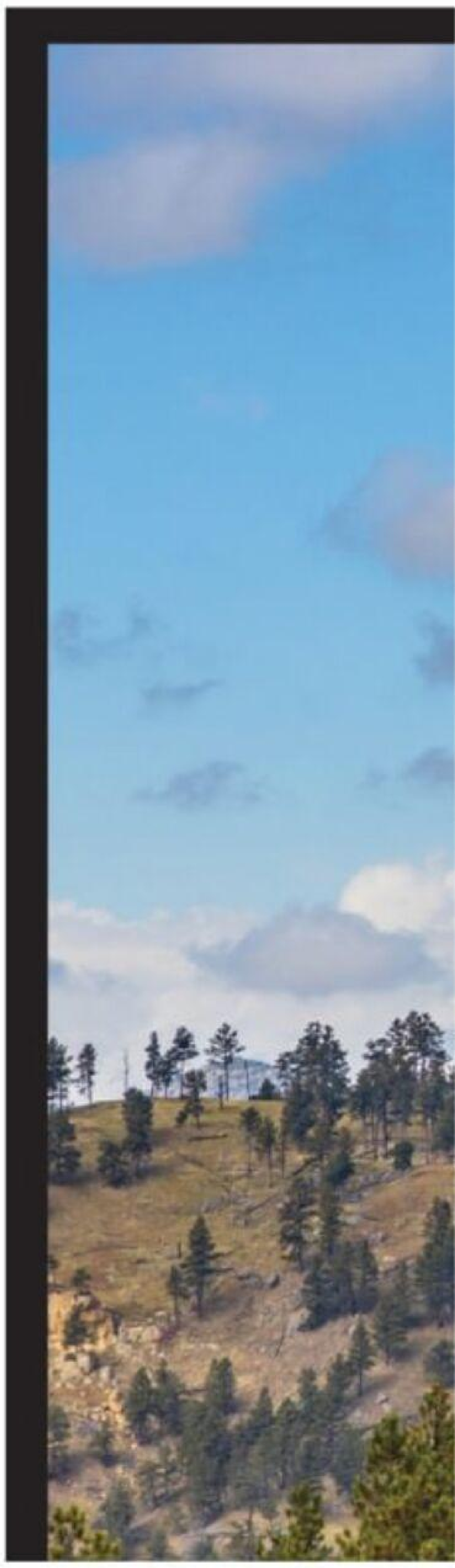
**You feel like a time traveler when exploring Havana's city center. The Baroque and Neoclassical architecture, narrow streets and wide plazas date from the 1500s onward. The 1950s cars have been kept running since revolution isolated Cuba's communist regime. Mix in tropical vegetation, vibrant music and a plate of *ropa vieja* and you know why you had to experience it.**

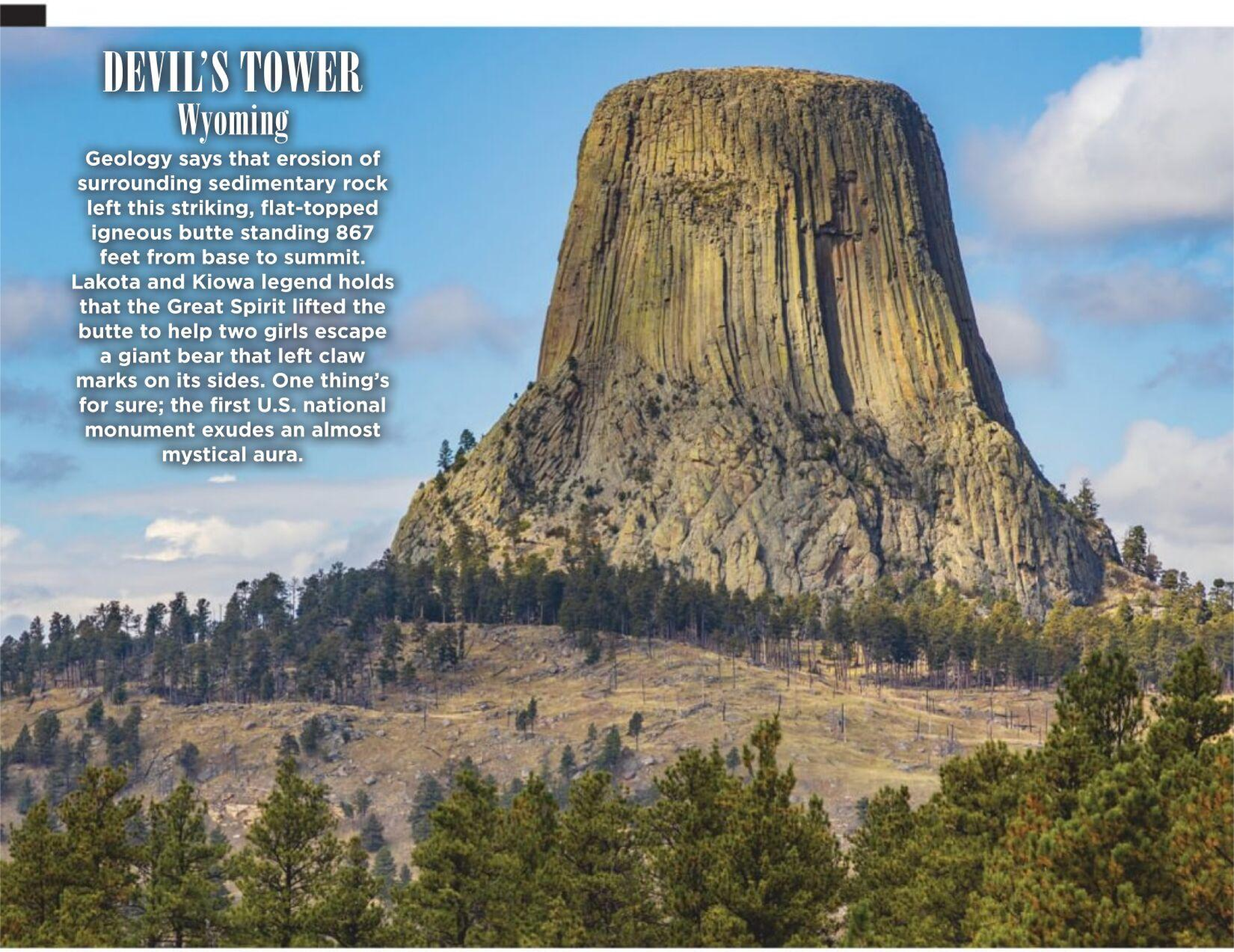


# Burj Khalifa

## DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

When the 163-story, 2,722-foot-tall Burj Khalifa was finished in 2009, it instantly took records held by other structures around the world for tallest skyscraper, tallest freestanding structure and tallest structure ever built. The non-acrophobic can ride one of 57 elevators to the 148th floor for views that sweep beyond Dubai and into the Al Marmoom Desert. Skyscraper? More like moonscraper.





## DEVIL'S TOWER

### Wyoming

Geology says that erosion of surrounding sedimentary rock left this striking, flat-topped igneous butte standing 867 feet from base to summit. Lakota and Kiowa legend holds that the Great Spirit lifted the butte to help two girls escape a giant bear that left claw marks on its sides. One thing's for sure; the first U.S. national monument exudes an almost mystical aura.

## Churchill War Rooms

### LONDON

They're cramped. They're damp. They're practically airless. But it's in this subterranean warren of rooms beneath a government building that newly appointed prime minister Winchester Churchill and dozens of military and civilian staff directed Britain's war efforts even as Germany's aerial bombing campaign reduced the streets above to rubble. This faithful recreation is a feel-the-history must for WWII buffs.

# Old Faithful

## YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

**Fun fact: When we gather around Old Faithful to gain a glorious view of the promised show, we're standing atop a geothermal chamber containing enough magma to fill the Grand Canyon! No matter, you'll forget all that when the world's most famous geyser blows 8,400 gallons of boiling water up to 185 feet in the sky. Didn't get enough? Wait about 90 minutes for it to reload.**

# Taj Mahal

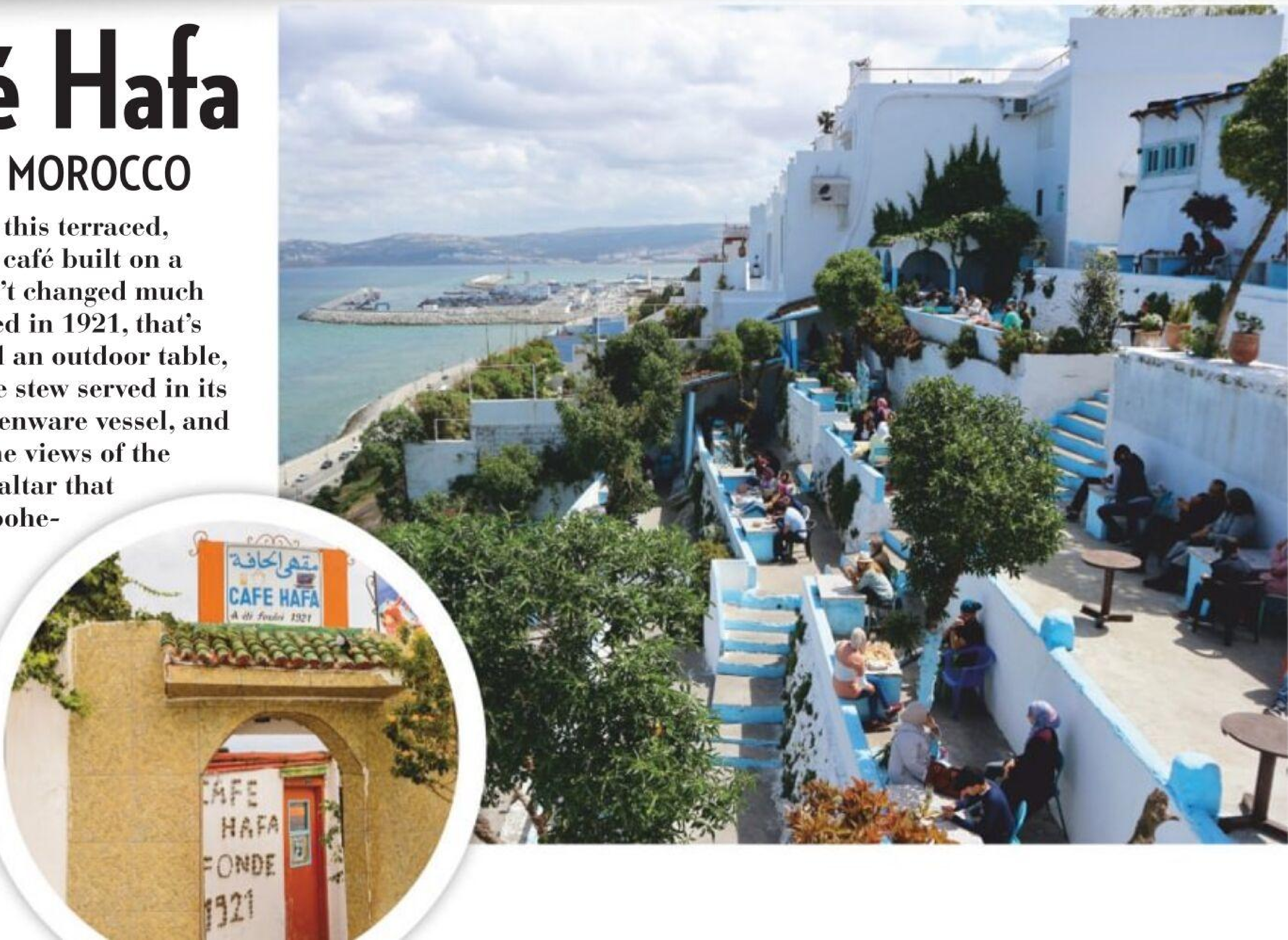
## AGRA, INDIA

**This absolutely iconic, 17th-century structure on the Yumana River is touted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for being "the jewel of Islamic art in India and one of the universally admired masterpieces of the world's heritage." Amid all the white marble and exacting symmetry, ponder that such extreme splendor was constructed as a tomb for the late wife of a grief-stricken emperor.**

# Café Hafa

## TANGIER, MOROCCO

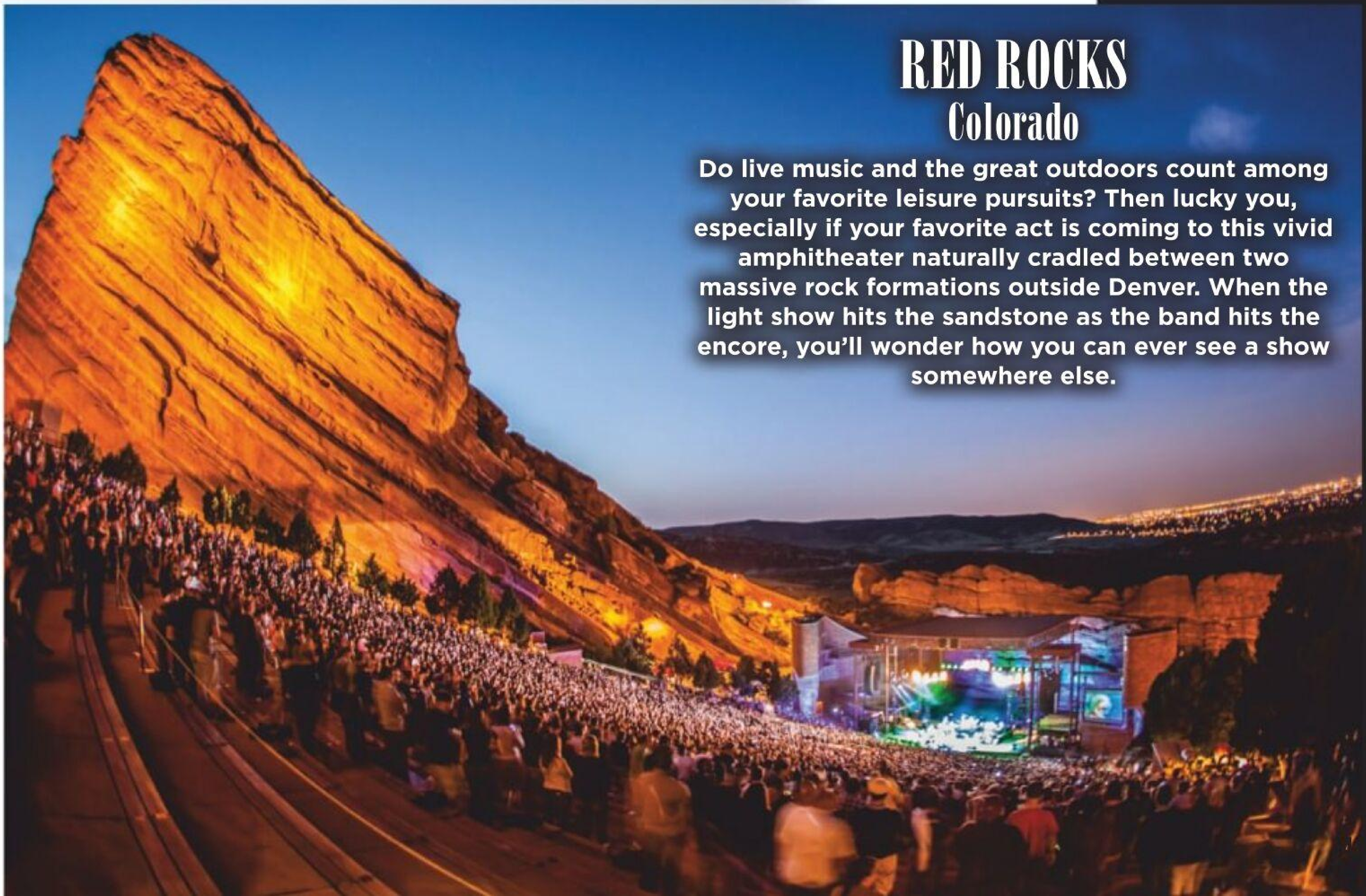
**If it feels like this terraced, white-walled café built on a cliffside hasn't changed much since it opened in 1921, that's the idea. Find an outdoor table, order a tagine stew served in its domed, earthenware vessel, and enjoy the same views of the Strait of Gibraltar that in the café's bohemian heyday attracted William S. Burroughs, Sean Connery and the Rolling Stones.**


مقهى الحافة
CAFE HAFA
A été Fondé 1921
CAFE HAFA FONDE 1921

# Faroe Islands

## NORTH ATLANTIC SEA

You have to love a land so intertwined with the sea that residents with webbed toes are said to have descended from seals. Beyond legends, this isolated archipelago territory of Denmark beckons you on misty hikes to stunning waterfalls and seaside cliffs, then welcomes you back into quiet, quaint villages with a hearty dish of local lamb or salmon. Savor it all.



# RED ROCKS

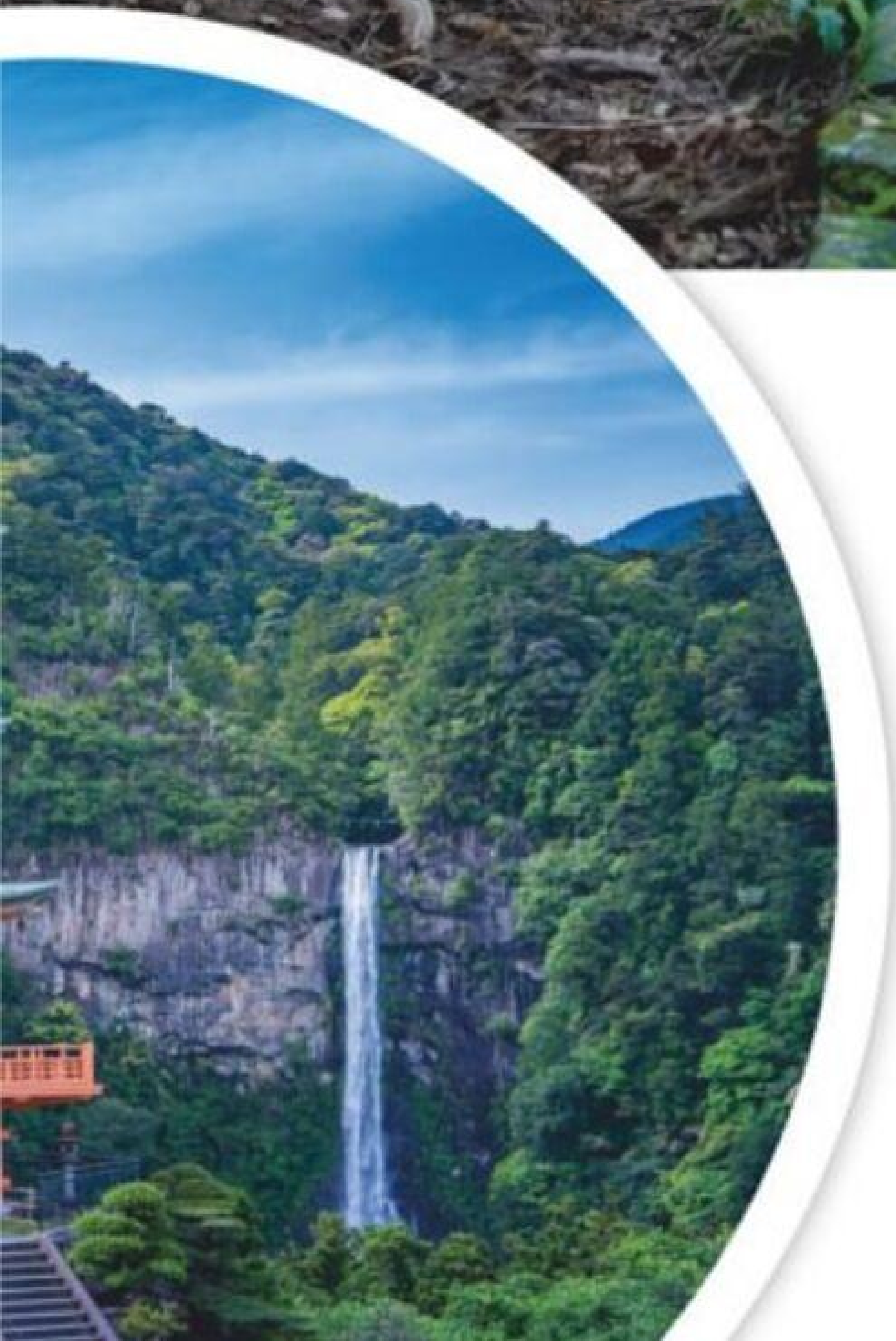
## Colorado

Do live music and the great outdoors count among your favorite leisure pursuits? Then lucky you, especially if your favorite act is coming to this vivid amphitheater naturally cradled between two massive rock formations outside Denver. When the light show hits the sandstone as the band hits the encore, you'll wonder how you can ever see a show somewhere else.

# Calvi, Corsica

## FRANCE

**Everybody from the Turks to the British to Barbary pirates have tussled over the beautiful, windswept Mediterranean island of Corsica over the last 1,000 years. Sail into the sailboat-bobbing harbor at Calvi, wander the cobbled streets of the 15th-century citadel that looms above, then descend to the village for a glass of local wine, and you'll want to make it yours, too.**



# Kumano Kodo

## JAPAN

**Walk in the literal footsteps of emperors on a series of ancient pilgrimage routes that crisscross Japan's Kii Peninsula to link sacred shrines that combine elements of Shinto, Buddhism, Shugendo and mountain worship. The shrines are indeed grand, but spending quiet hours on original stone pathways that lead deep into fern-rich forests and on to peaceful village teahouses creates another sense of spirituality.**

# The White House

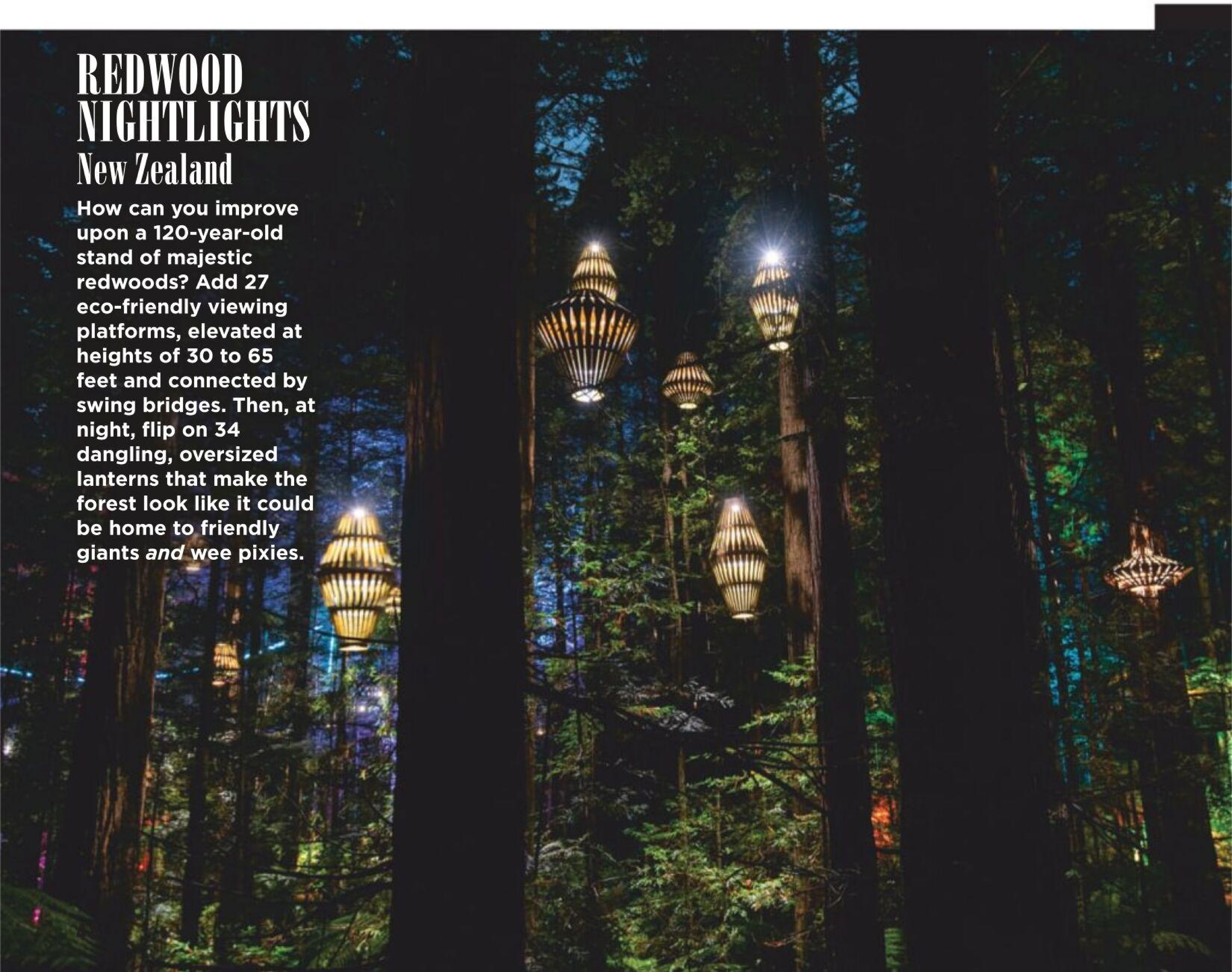
## WASHINGTON, D.C.

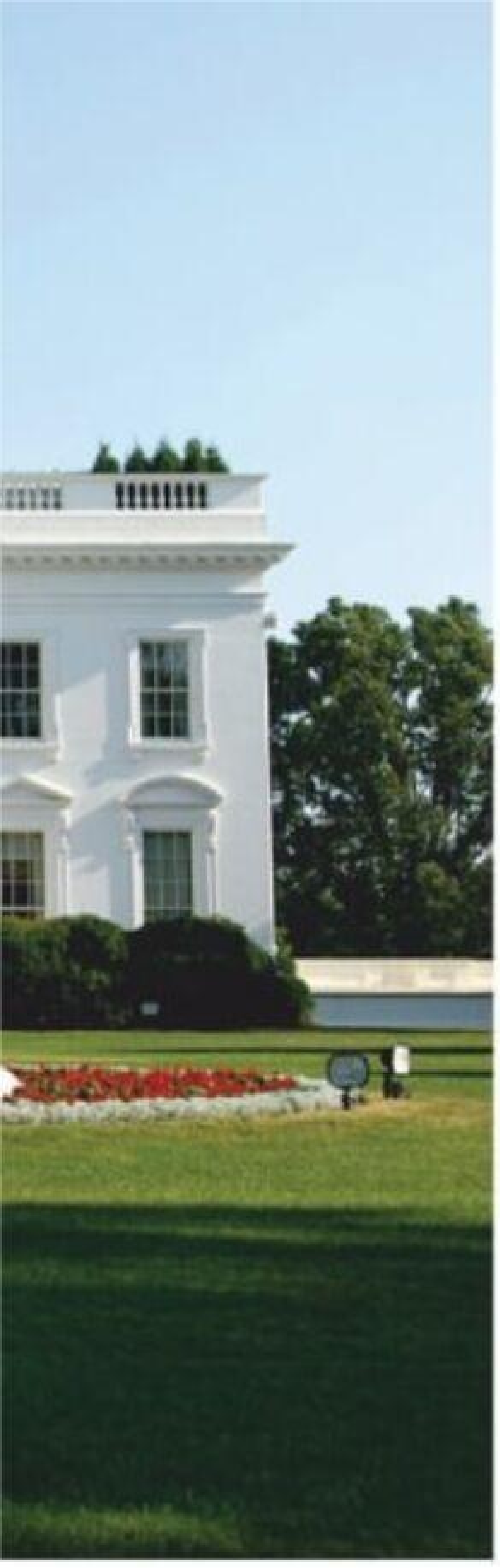
The constant presence of "The People's House" in the media tends to dull some of its stateliness. But to cross its threshold and be present in spaces shared by every U.S. president since John Adams, not to mention scores of foreign heads of state, is to be forcefully reminded of its rightful place in 225 years of world-shaping events.

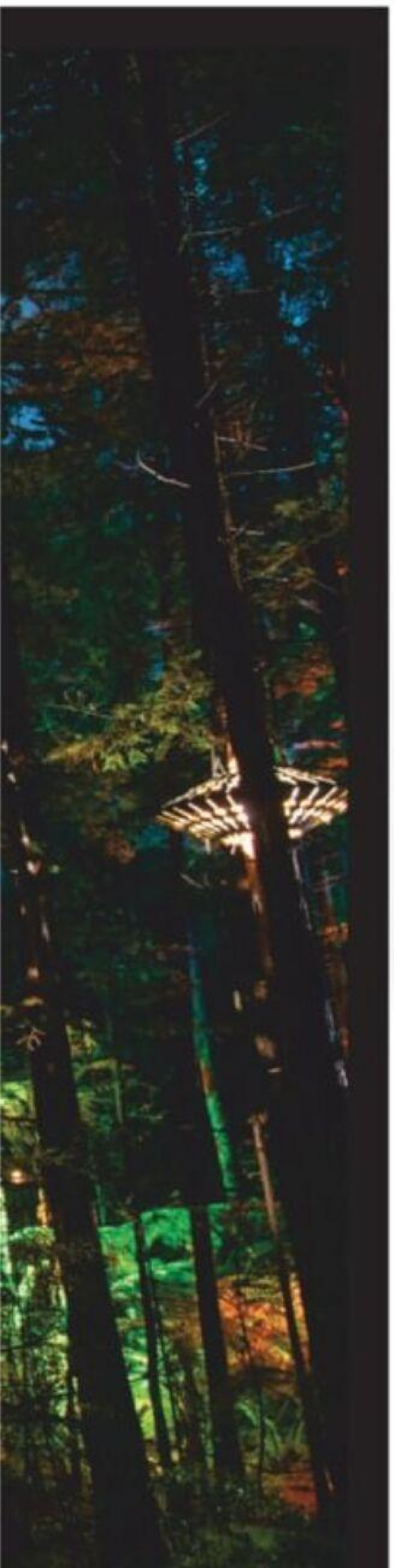
# REDWOOD NIGHTLIGHTS

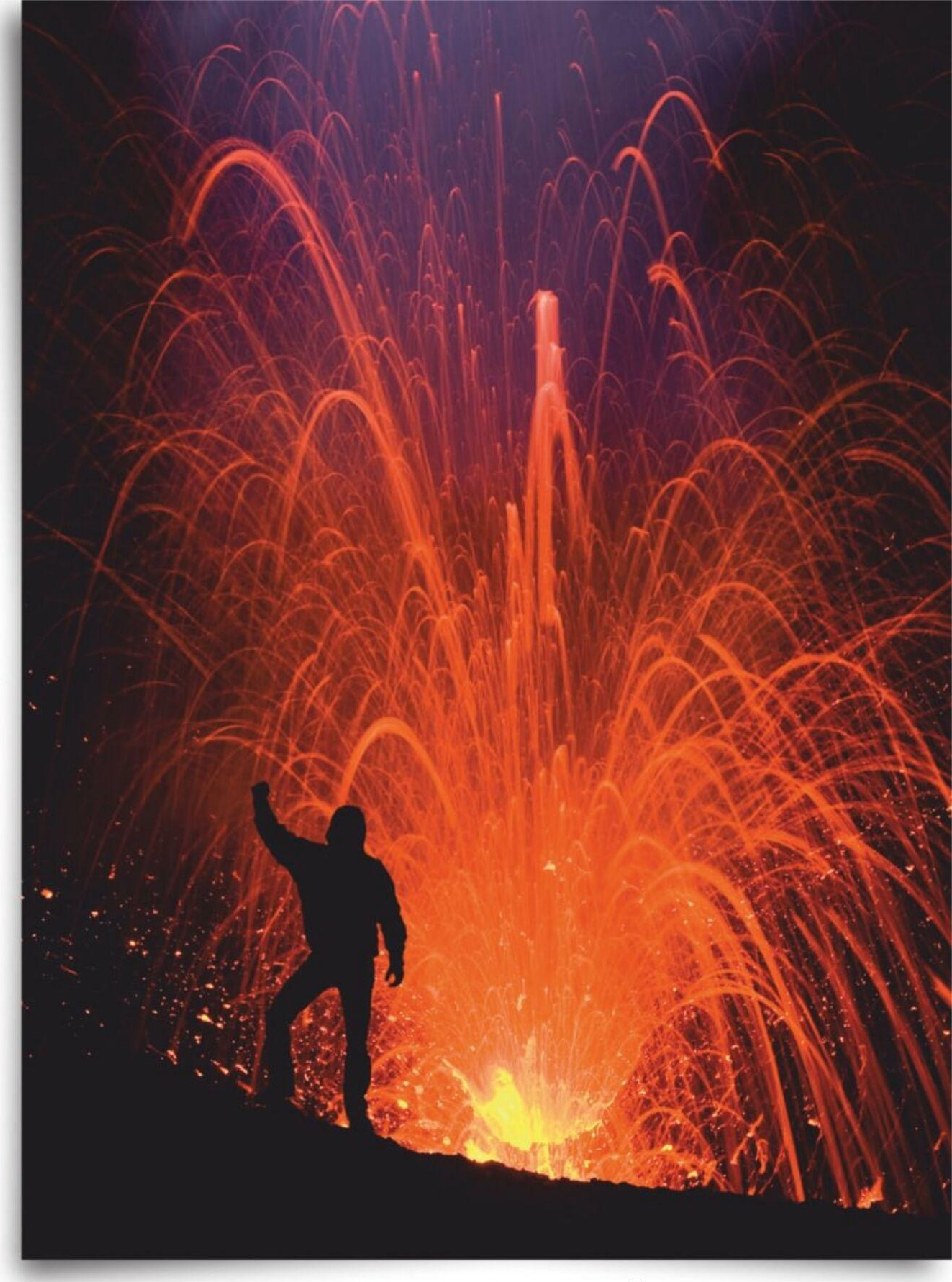
## New Zealand

**How can you improve upon a 120-year-old stand of majestic redwoods? Add 27 eco-friendly viewing platforms, elevated at heights of 30 to 65 feet and connected by swing bridges. Then, at night, flip on 34 dangling, oversized lanterns that make the forest look like it could be home to friendly giants *and* wee pixies.**









# Mount Yasur Volcano

## TANNA ISLAND, VANUATU

**"Are they really letting me do this?" you might cautiously wonder as you walk right up to the edge of this active volcano in the South Pacific. Yes, they are, and yep, that's molten lava down below and fiery debris being hurled into the air by earth-rumbling explosions. Danger exists, of course, but staying at approved viewing spots delivers primordial thrills, especially at night.**

# KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

## SWEEPING AFRICAN SAVANNAHS ARE EVEN MORE GORGEOUS WHEN POPULATED BY LIONS, GIRAFFES AND ELEPHANTS.

### By Steve Russell

In our movie-molded imaginations, Africa is always scorching hot. Take a 15-hour flight from Washington D.C. to Cape Town on the southern tip of South Africa in July, however, and you deplane into decidedly nippy conditions. Scooting toward a mist-shrouded harborfront hotel to dodge a frigid wave crashing over the seawall, you're grateful you packed outerwear appropriate for what is winter in the Southern Hemisphere. Frankly, it's hard to believe this is a land of zebras, lions and elephants.

But that is exactly why my two teenage children and I have traveled here, on a bucket-list safari into Kruger National Park and its surrounding wilds. So, after a full day of Cape Town sightseeing that includes the wonderful Two Oceans Aquarium, we hop a flight to Limpopo Province and the small airport at Hoedspruit, gateway for many Kruger visitors. Though only three hours north of Cape Town by air, Kruger is closer to the equator and removed from coastal bluster, so conditions are much drier and balmier upon touchdown.

We're met by a guide from Rukiya Safari Camp, which sits deep inside a 7,400-acre private nature reserve that abuts Kruger. As soon as our SUV clears the gate, the road turns dusty and bumpy, and our eager tourist eyes are on the lookout for the sort of wildlife that doesn't roam freely in Virginia. I'm already marveling at 10-foot-

If you like giraffes, you'll love a safari through South Africa's Kruger National Park.

It’s dust bath time for an elephant calf and its doting mom in Kruger National Park.

high termite mounds and a corkscrew-horned kudu antelope when the guide casually points toward two giraffes, a mother and a juvenile, ambling through bushveld treetops so close we can see them blink as they stare at us. They possess that unique giraffe attribute of being at once elegant and ungainly, and they are beautiful. Giraffes top my daughter's list of must-see creatures, and I kid that now I can just put her on a flight back home.

Rukiya is even more welcoming than its website touted. Situated under a canopy of trees, six glamping-style tents (complete with electricity and comfy beds) perch atop platforms linked by a raised, wooden walkway. Just steps away flows a gentle section of the Blyde River that looks ripe for wading—until you spot the 11-foot crocodile sunning itself on the opposite bank. We choose to keep our tent flap closed while unpacking, having been told that in addition to the curious baboons that explore our end of camp, venomous spiders, scorpions and cobras (oh my!) are not uncommon to the bush.

The sun sets early this time of year, and we clamber into an open, safari-outfitted jeep for a night game drive. Unlike Kruger, this reserve isn't home to the "Big Five," meaning no lions, leopards, rhinos, elephants or cape buffalos. No matter, we're excited to view zebras, impalas, warthogs, and plenty more giraffes in the dusk—not to mention a glorious sunset from atop a rocky outcropping. On the night-enveloped ride back to camp, our ever-alert guide spotlights a large, lone hyena that pays us scant attention as it scent-tracks some unfortunate prey through the scrub. Whoa, we really are in Africa.

We can see our breath in the tent as phone alarms rouse us at 5 a.m. for a morning game drive. The temperature is no warmer than 40°F, and I'm thankful for the bed-warming hot water bottles that got us through the night.

After a quick cup of steaming coffee, twin safari jeeps depart into pitch darkness, carrying a dozen groggy Rukiya guests huddled under blankets for a half-hour ride to a neighboring reserve that, while private, has an open border to Kruger and its roaming Big Five population. Just because they're here doesn't mean they want to be seen, however, especially those secretive by nature, like big cats, or fond of deep bush, like rare rhinos. Luckily, each jeep has an experienced tracker who sits in a special seat above the front bumper, the better to spot animal sign before it disappears under the tires. Skilled though they are, they look like bait perched out there, and I wonder if they can get life insurance.

Dawn breaks, allowing us to shed blankets, gloves and hats, and to gain a better sense of the terrain. We're following paths around the Olifants River, traversing its shallow tributaries and climbing long, steep inclines that afford sweeping views of bushveld woodlands. Already we've stopped paying much attention to the abundant impalas (except in the delicious impala stew served for dinner last night), but we happily gawp at small herds, also known as "towers," of giraffes, and thrill to our first elephant sightings, including a young bull elephant that feints a charge in our direction until pulling up short.

I enjoy scanning the bush, but realize that my untrained eye might be better focused on the tracker, who has been staring intently at the ground and motioning the driver to turn one way then another. At my inquiry, he discloses that he's following fresh black rhino sign, and then alarms us by exiting his seat and disappearing into the bush for several minutes. We press on, following sign on a trail that intersects with a sizable herd of cape buffalo, their scoop-shaped horns flattened onto their foreheads like helmets. "This is the meanest, most dangerous animal in South Africa," the guide whispers, advising against any sudden movements. Completely surrounded, there is nothing to do but cut the engine and wait for the herd to graze onward. We track the rhino for another half hour, but by the time we pause for a late breakfast of yogurt-and-granola parfaits, the tracker concedes that the sign has grown too indistinct to follow into the bush.

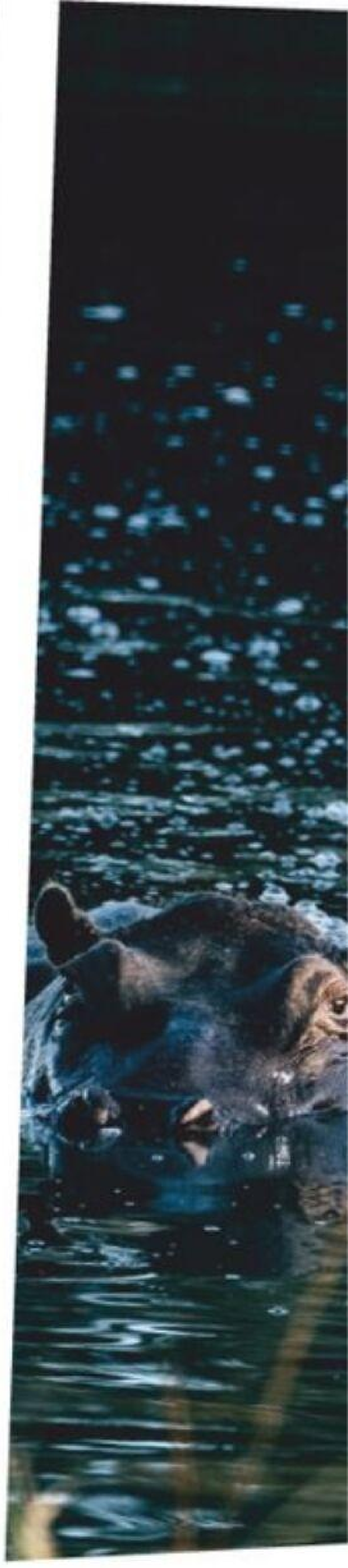
Having enjoyed the thrill of the "hunt," I'm disappointed, until my bird-loving son perks up and points out a pretty, patchwork-hued specimen that lands on a nearby branch. He identifies it as a lilac-breasted roller, native to these parts, and it is as extraordinary to him as any member of the Big Five. Thanks, lilac-breasted roller, for making his day—and therefore mine.

At 4.9 million acres, Kruger National Park is more than double the size of Yellowstone, and for that matter, more than a million acres larger than Connecticut. Like Yellowstone, it can be navigated by private vehicles, but that feels daunting in lots of ways, so even though the kids have become pro wildlife spotters, I've secured a guide for both of our day-long explorations.

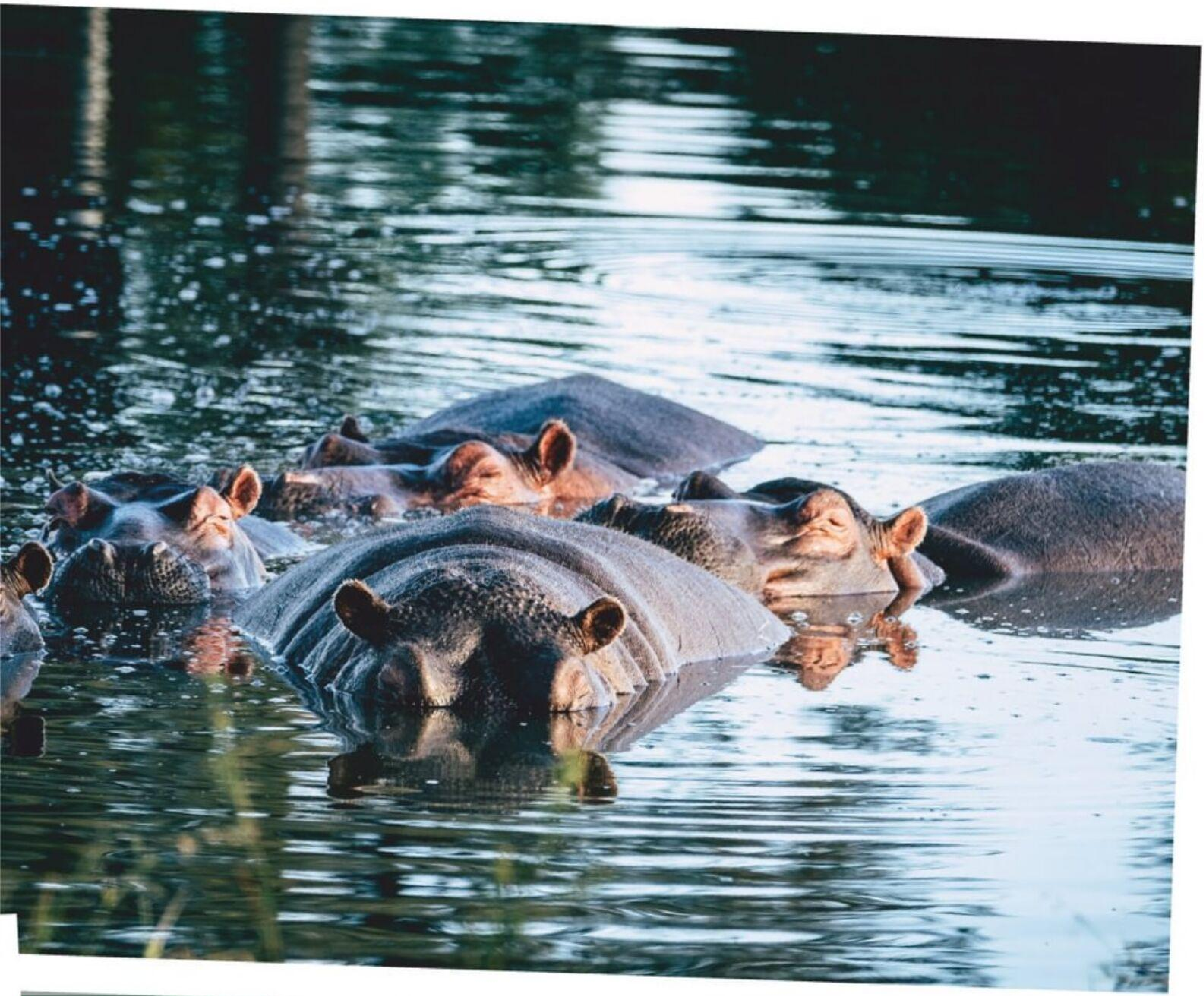
Cruising a network of paved and dirt roads across ecozones that shift from exposed granite hills to grassy savannahs to thicketed woodlands and back again, you feel the expanse of this land. The sky is big, the horizons are far, and the remote silence can be lolling until suddenly the jeep is directly alongside herds of zebras, giraffes and elephants. What it's *not* is a zoo, and when our guide occasionally pulls over to confer with other guides, I figure out that "ngala" is a local tribal word for lion, and that Kruger's ngalas are being quite elusive today, especially as the heat of midday builds.

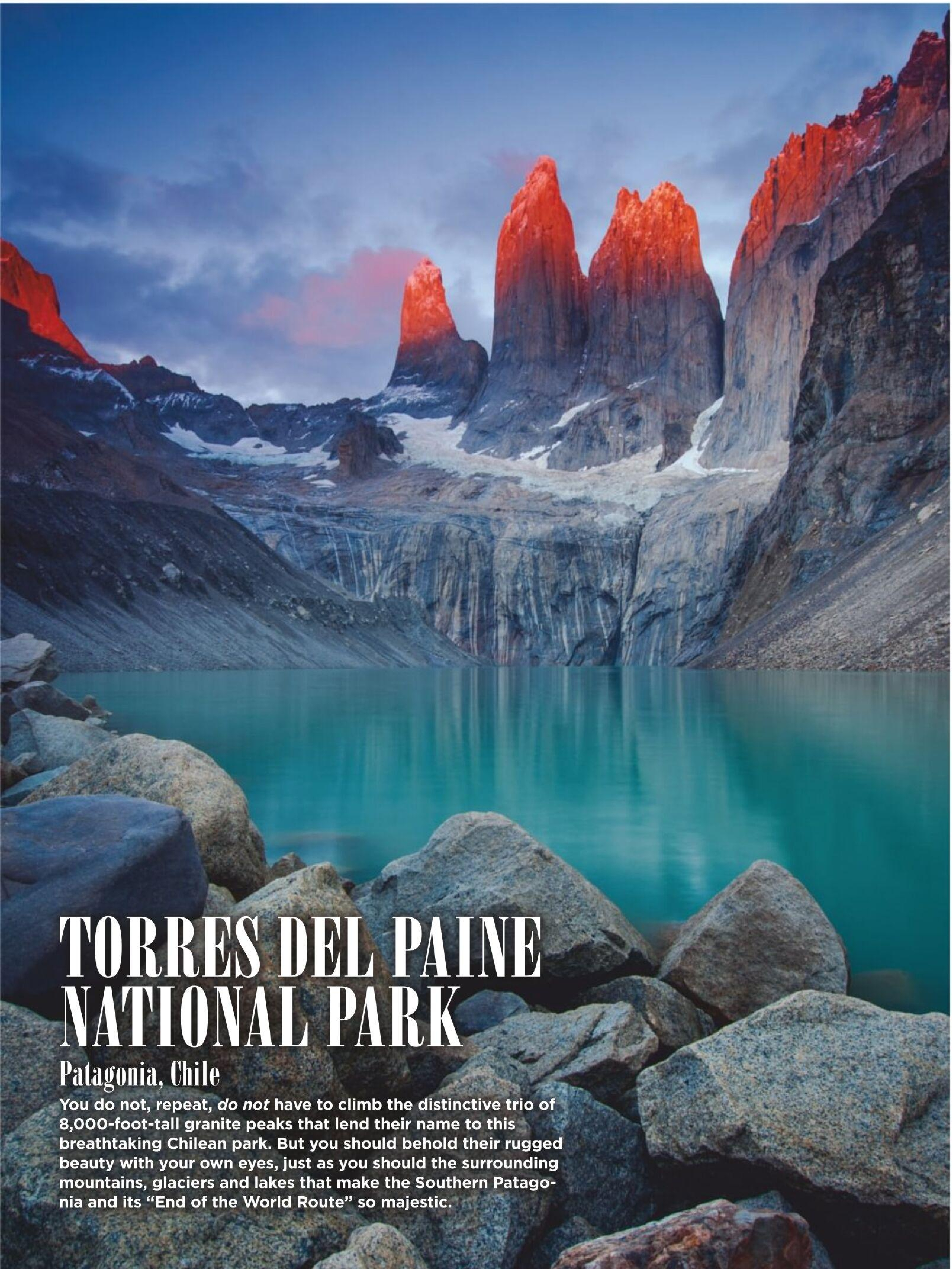
That's OK, nobody promised us lions, and pleasant surprises continue to find us, including a close-up encounter with a wandering ostrich so big and strong I swear I could saddle and ride him. (Not that he'd let me.) Then it happens: As we train our binoculars on a wildebeest herd up ahead, the jeep halts and we follow the guide's gaze to a spot of tree shade. There, camouflaged in the dried grass, sit two male lions. They eye the wildebeests, put don't seem inclined to leave the shade at this hour. The guide recognizes one of the lions, which has been suffering from an injured paw but seems to be on the mend.

When another jeep shows up, we move on. It's about time to make our way back to the outer gate, but the guide chooses a route that brings us to a short bridge with an elevated view of a baseball field-sized watering hole. There are several huge crocs basking on an edge near several partially submerged boulders that presently splash and reveal themselves to be a pod of hippos. Within a few minutes, a herd of zebra trot across the road ahead to share the water's edge with nervous impalas, and two large female elephants and their progeny emerge from trees on the far side, dip their trunks and shower themselves. We take it all in, simply awestruck. This is why we came to Africa on safari, and to Kruger National Park. And it's a sight we won't soon forget.



**Very colorful lilac-breasted rollers are native to Kruger.**

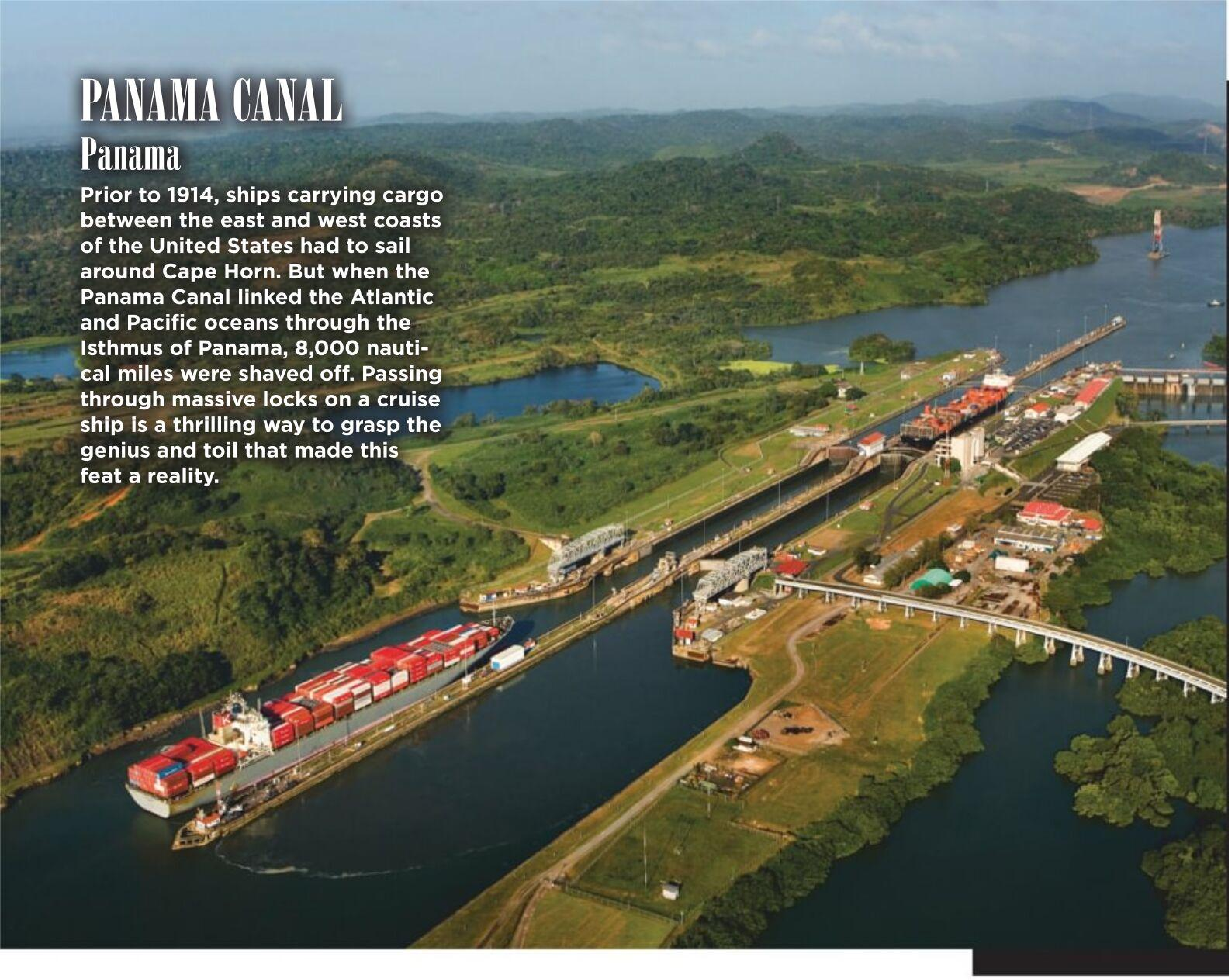




# TORRES DEL PAINE NATIONAL PARK

## Patagonia, Chile

You do not, repeat, *do not* have to climb the distinctive trio of 8,000-foot-tall granite peaks that lend their name to this breathtaking Chilean park. But you should behold their rugged beauty with your own eyes, just as you should the surrounding mountains, glaciers and lakes that make the Southern Patagonia and its "End of the World Route" so majestic.



# PANAMA CANAL

## Panama

**Prior to 1914, ships carrying cargo between the east and west coasts of the United States had to sail around Cape Horn. But when the Panama Canal linked the Atlantic and Pacific oceans through the Isthmus of Panama, 8,000 nautical miles were shaved off. Passing through massive locks on a cruise ship is a thrilling way to grasp the genius and toil that made this feat a reality.**

# Seville

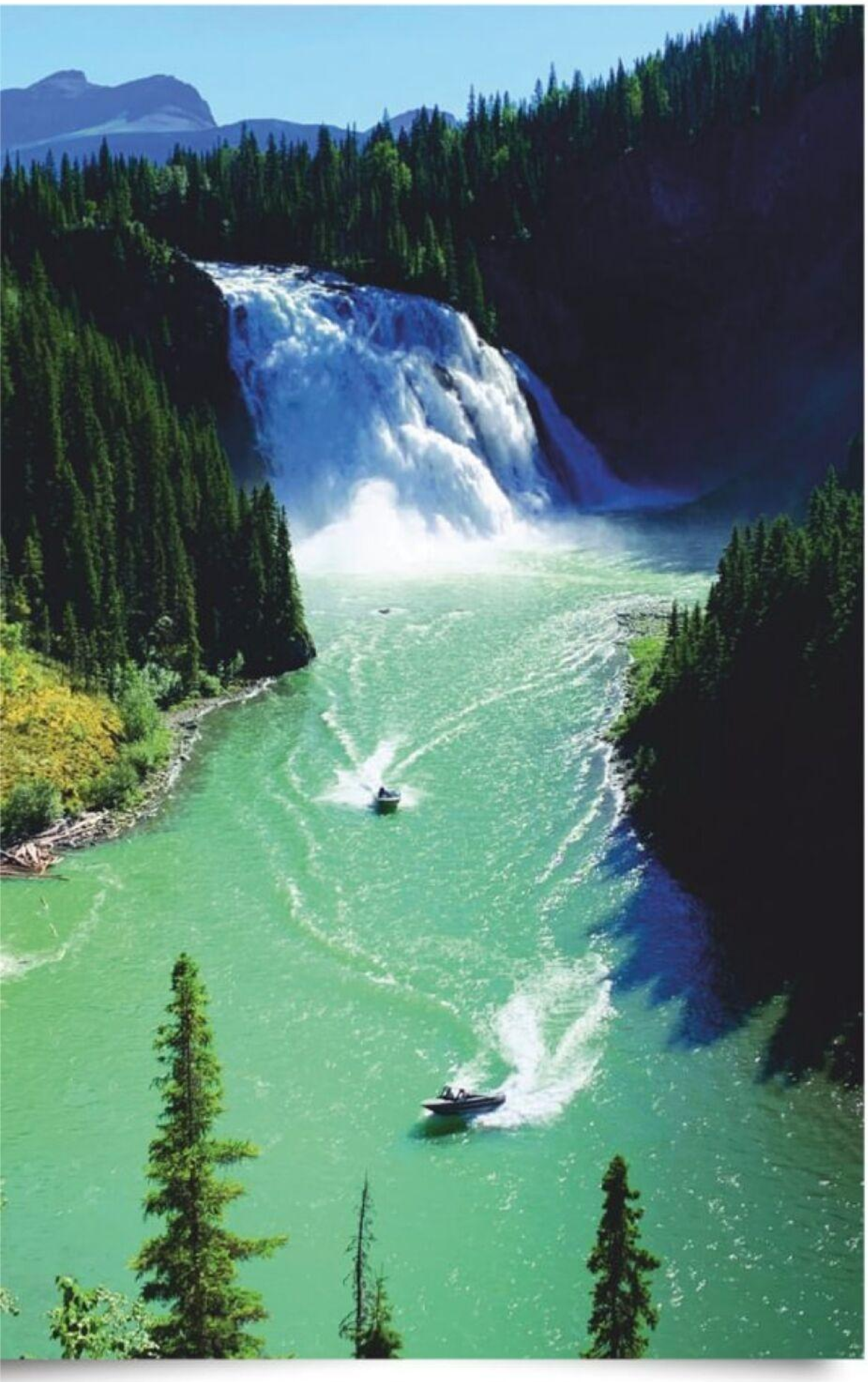
## SPAIN

Real Alcazar, a sprawling palace complex that mixes elegant, centuries-spanning architecture with palm tree-studded gardens and roaming peacocks, is reason enough alone to make this historic city in southern Spain a destination. Toss in a colossal, modern-art lattice structure complete with elevated walkway, and some of Spain's best tapas, and Seville is a bucket list no-brainer.

# Tumbler Ridge Global Geopark

## BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

Two million acres of unspoiled wilderness await within this UNESCO-designated zone in the Canadian Rockies. Remote, yes, but you won't be the first to enjoy the abundance of waterfalls, summits, canyons and caves, as you'll realize when you find yourself following preserved dinosaur tracks, including an impressively distinct ankylosaur trackway discovered by two local boys only 25 years ago.



# Giza Plateau

## EGYPT

**For children, viewing pictures of the Great Pyramid and Great Sphinx is often the first time they think, "I want to see that with my own eyes." Even if it takes decades to fulfill that wish, childlike awe remains fully intact when you enter the 4,600-year-old pyramid to behold the sarcophagus of pharaoh Khufu, and walk the near-football-field length from paw to tail of the colossal, noseless Sphinx.**

# The Reclining Buddha

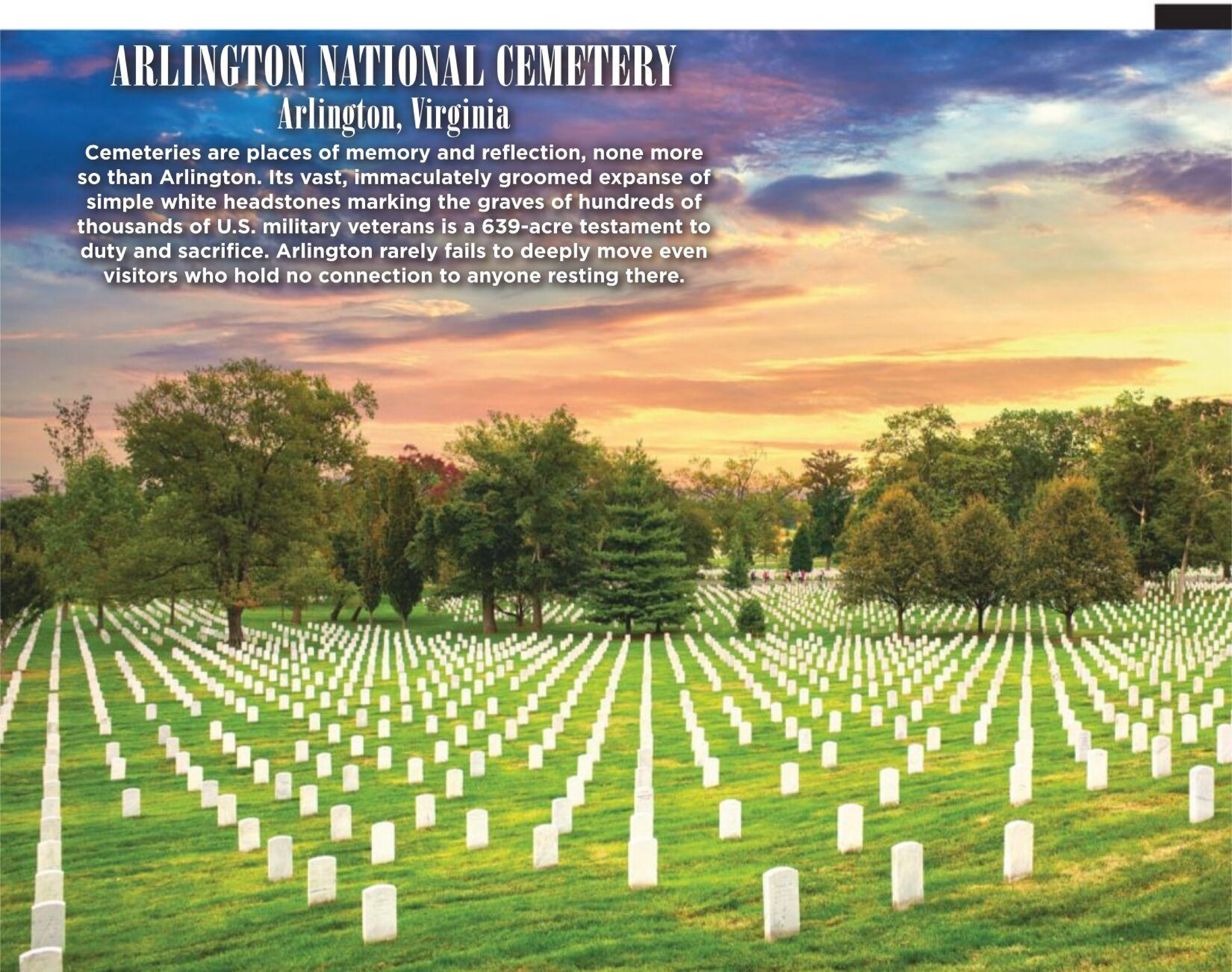
## BANGKOK, THAILAND

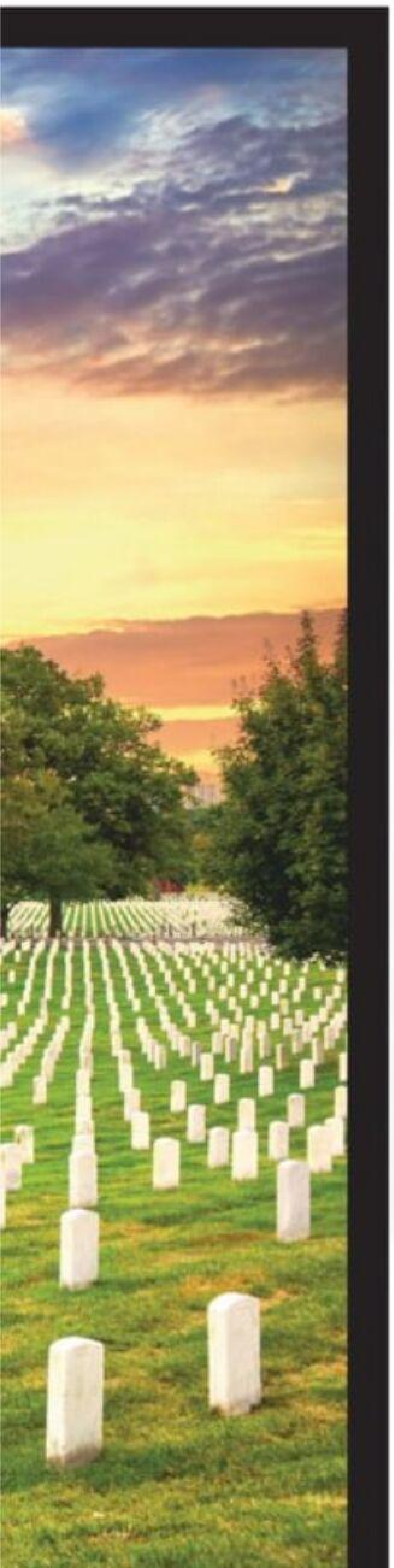
There are plenty of reasons to visit the temple complex of Wat Pho, from the towering, tiled stupa shaped like square bells to thousands of ancient stone inscriptions once used for public education. You can even get a Thai massage at the onsite massage school. Top of list, though, is the famous Reclining Buddha, a gold-plated, 150-foot-long statue of Buddhism's founder depicted as he enters Nirvana.

# ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

## Arlington, Virginia

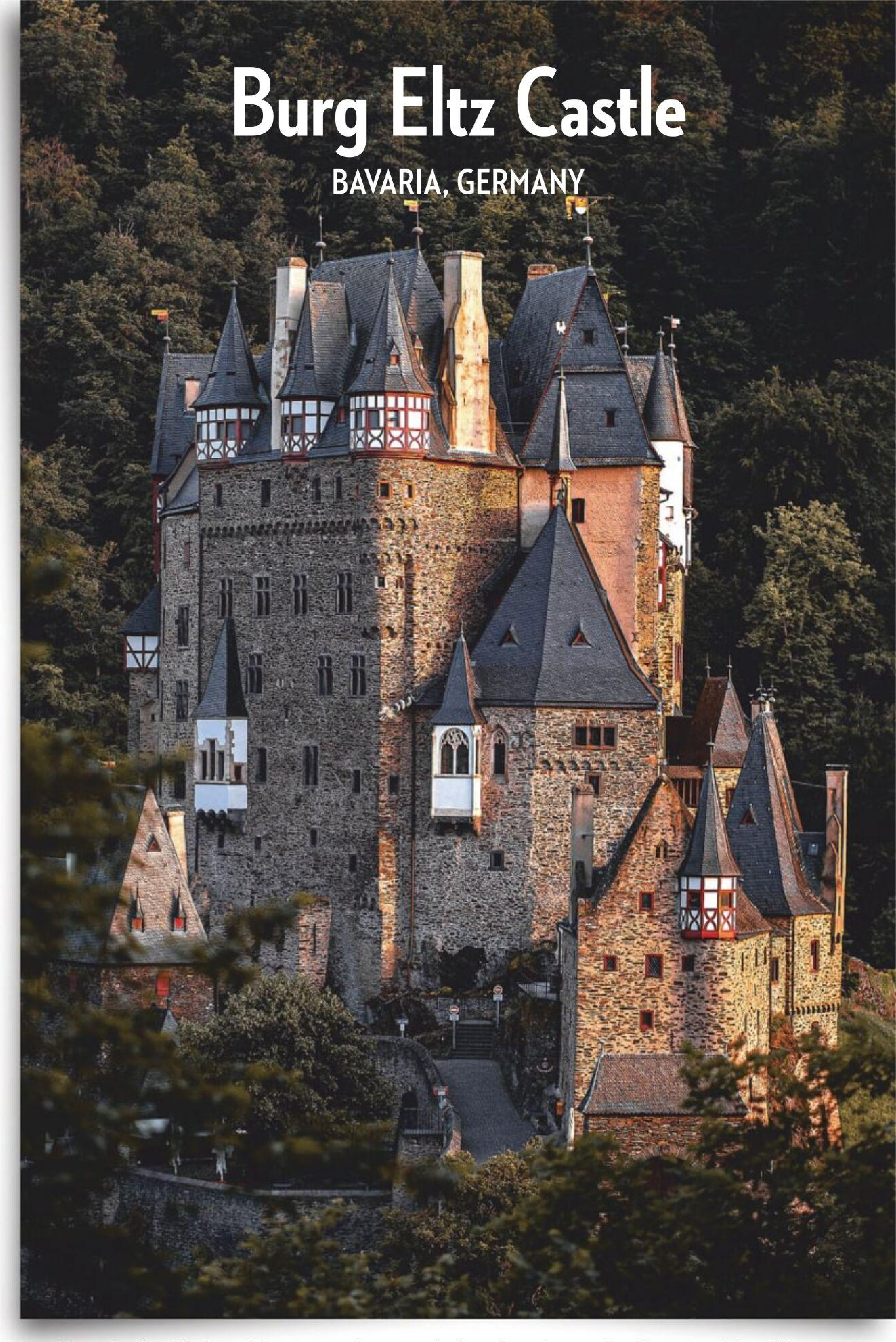
Cemeteries are places of memory and reflection, none more so than Arlington. Its vast, immaculately groomed expanse of simple white headstones marking the graves of hundreds of thousands of U.S. military veterans is a 639-acre testament to duty and sacrifice. Arlington rarely fails to deeply move even visitors who hold no connection to anyone resting there.





# Burg Eltz Castle

## BAVARIA, GERMANY



Given its fortified position atop a large rock deep in a forested valley, attacking this particular medieval castle is foolhardy at best, but that didn't dissuade a group of catapult-equipped knights from unsuccessfully laying siege for two years. Luckily, 700 years later, we can simply buy a ticket to enter a landmark so iconic it has been depicted on German money.

# Colmar

## FRANCE

Mostly spared from conflicts spanning from the French Revolution through WWII, Colmar's colorful, gingerbread-house architecture, which incorporates influences from nearby Germany and Switzerland, is wonderfully preserved in the city center. That some of that architecture sits along narrow, postcard-worthy river canals that earn the nickname "Little Venice" just pushes the Old-World charm over the top.

# MACHU PICCHU

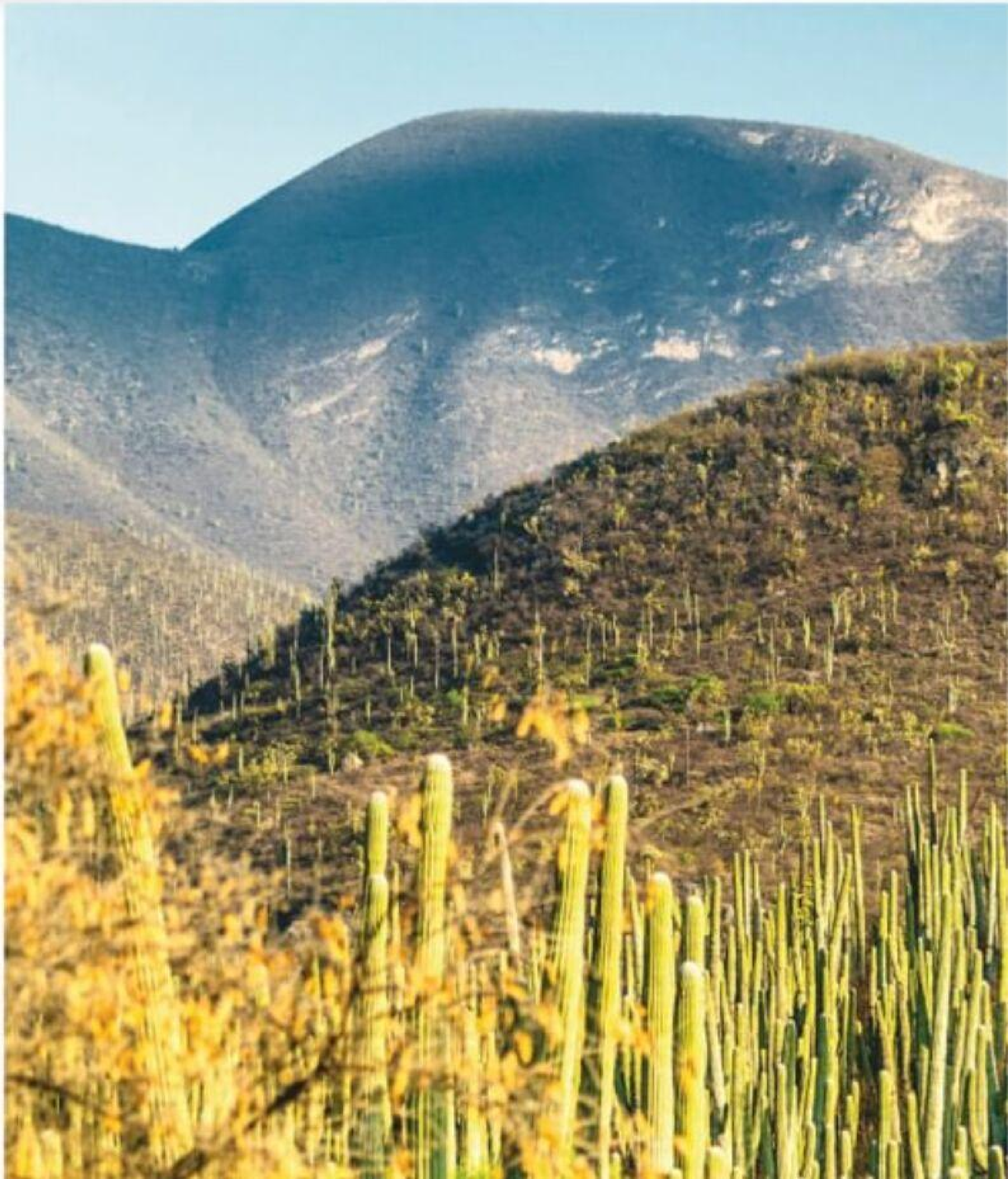
## Peru

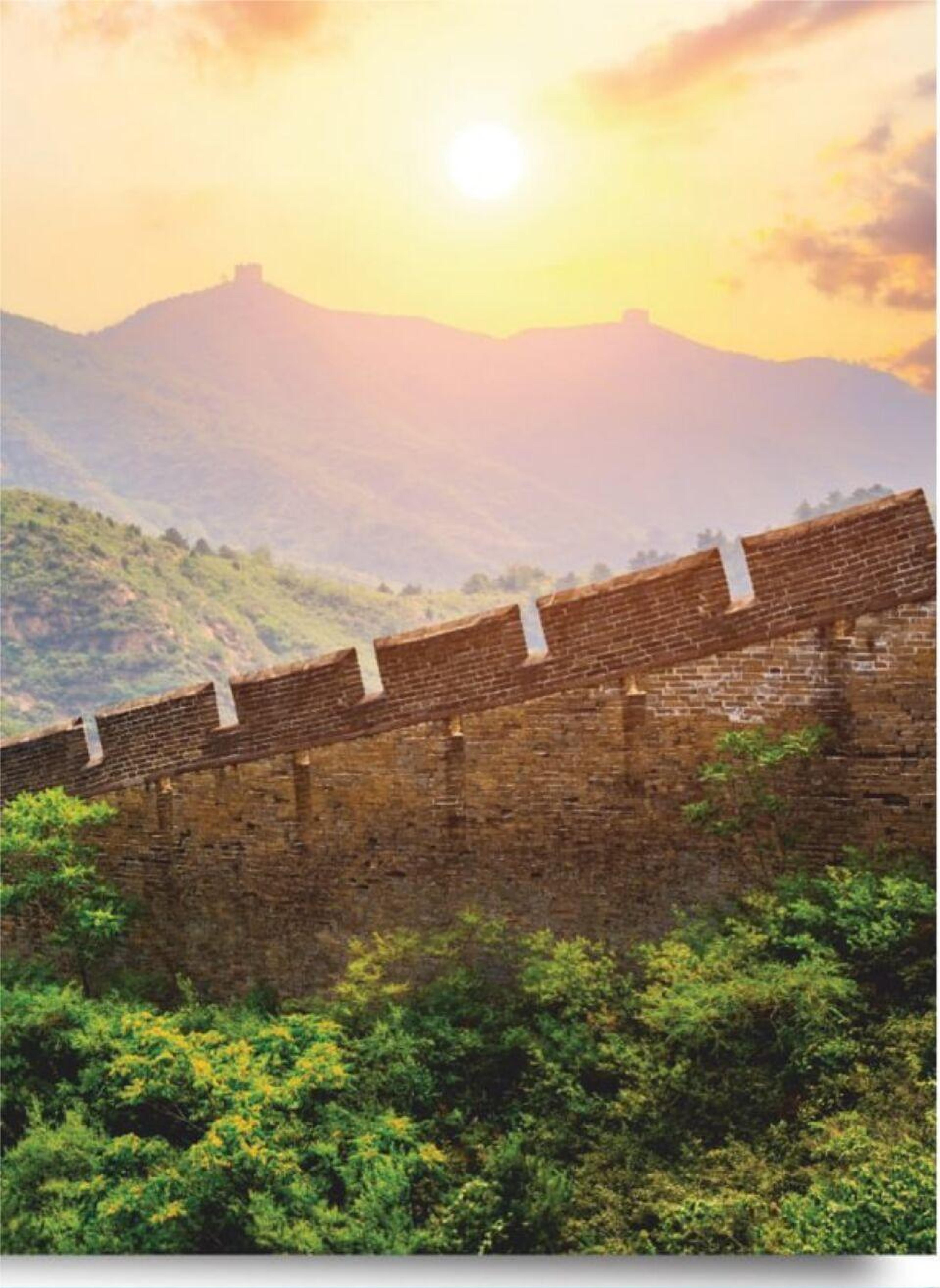
The geometric temple ruins and elaborate terraces of the iconic Incan royal estate, built upon a rounded slope beneath a mountain peak in the 15th century, is undeniably pleasing to the eye. Imagination also draws us here, though, fired by the notion of such a mystical place being inhabited for only a short time before being abandoned and swallowed by the jungle.

# TEHUACAN-CUICATLAN BIOSPHERE RESERVE

### Southern Mexico

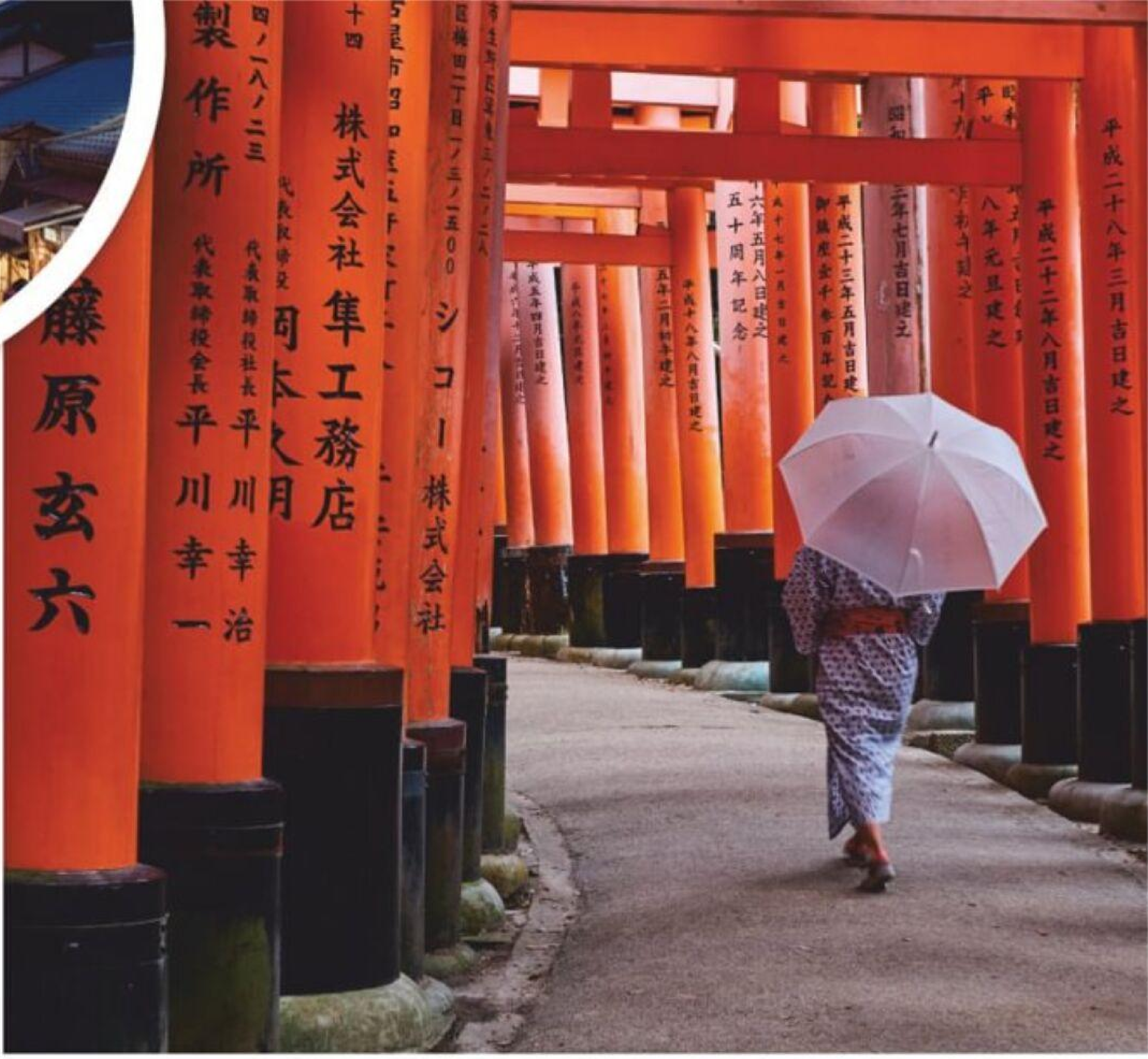
If you like cacti, or just fabulously different ecologies, this 359,000-acre valley between mountain ranges is for you. Hundreds of cactus species, from squat balls to towering columns, are so artfully arranged on the arid landscape that you might think you've found a botanical cactus garden. But the only planning has been done by nature. Wander and enjoy—maybe just don't bring along any balloons.





# Great Wall of China

Of course you want to visit one of the world's greatest building projects. You want to walk a bit of its 13,000 miles and gaze ahead at its watchtower-fortified length snaking across hills and valleys to the far horizon. You want to feel its bricks and thereby its 2,700-year history. And afterward, you still won't be able to grasp how such a marvel was ever possible.



# Kyoto

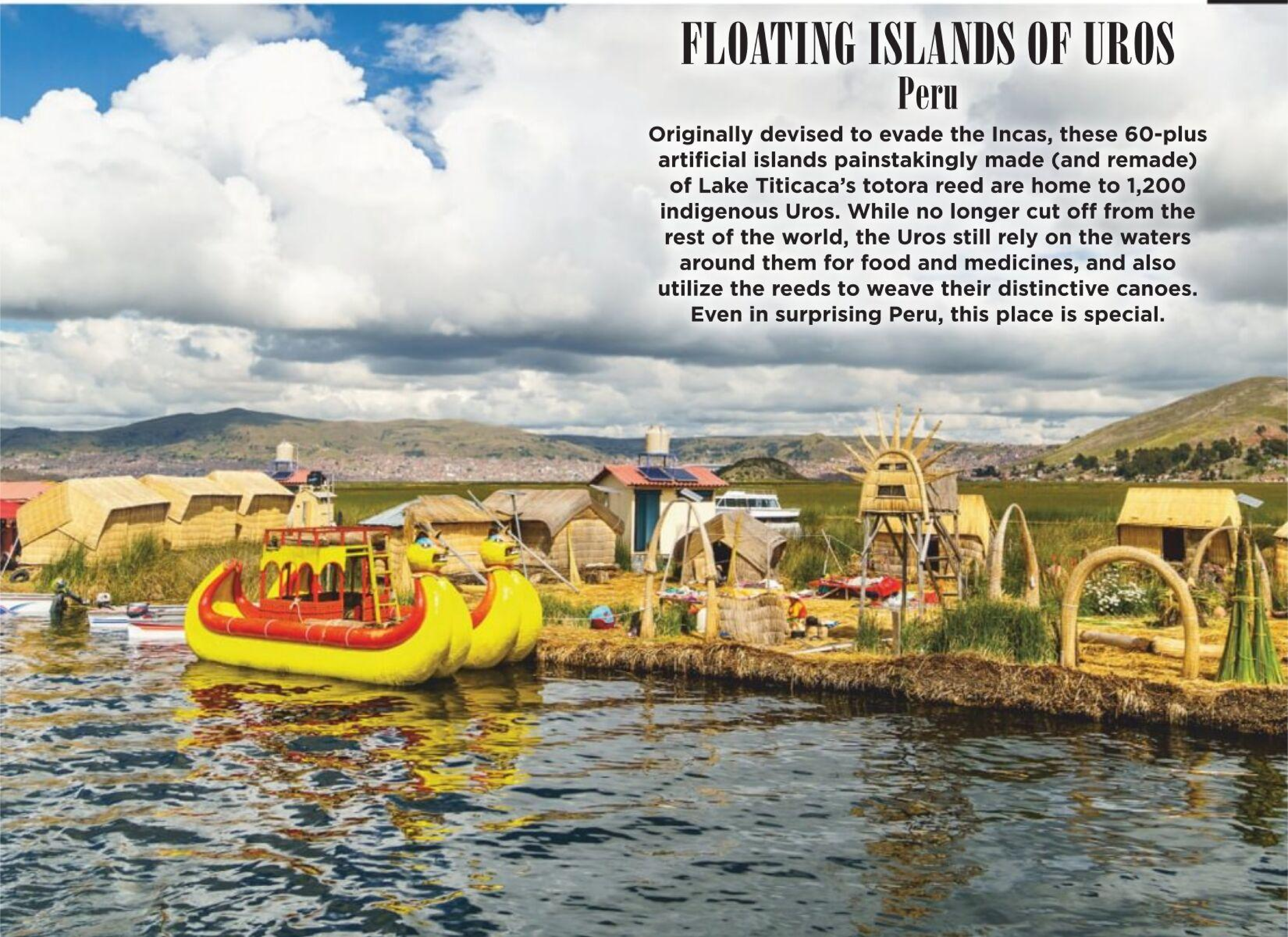
## JAPAN

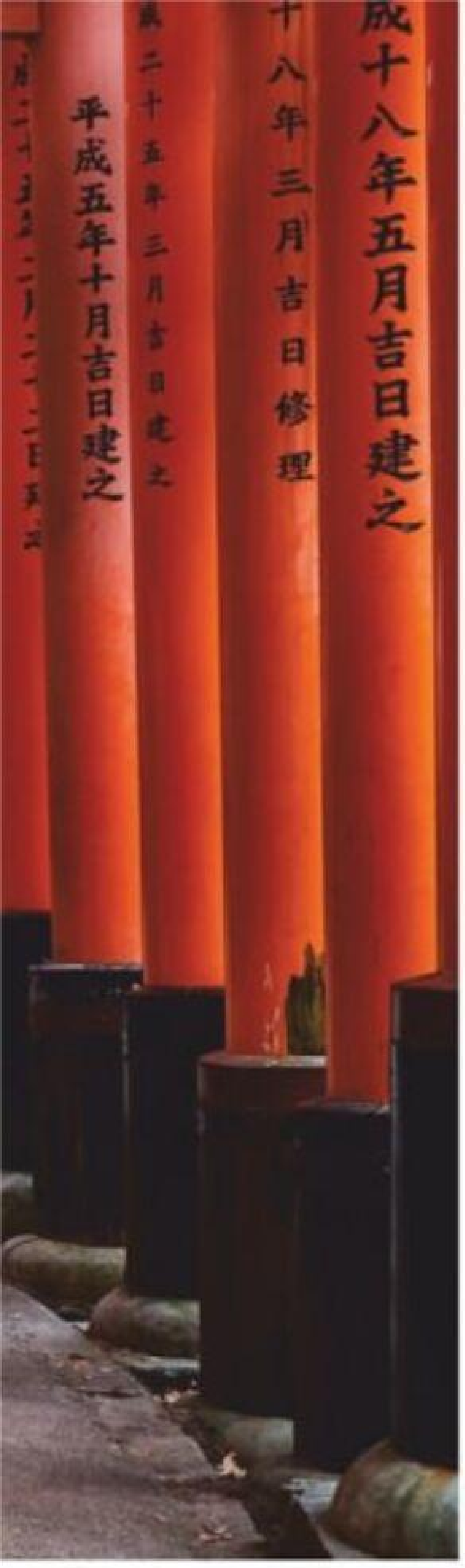
**Japan's previous capital for 1,000 years, Kyoto is the flip side to Tokyo's frenetic modernism. At its Shinto shrines, walk woodland trails that wind through tunnels formed by rows of seemingly endless red *torii* gates. Wander the regal grounds of the former Imperial Palace. And don't miss the wooden storefronts of the Higashiyama District—in Kyoto, even shopping is restorative.**

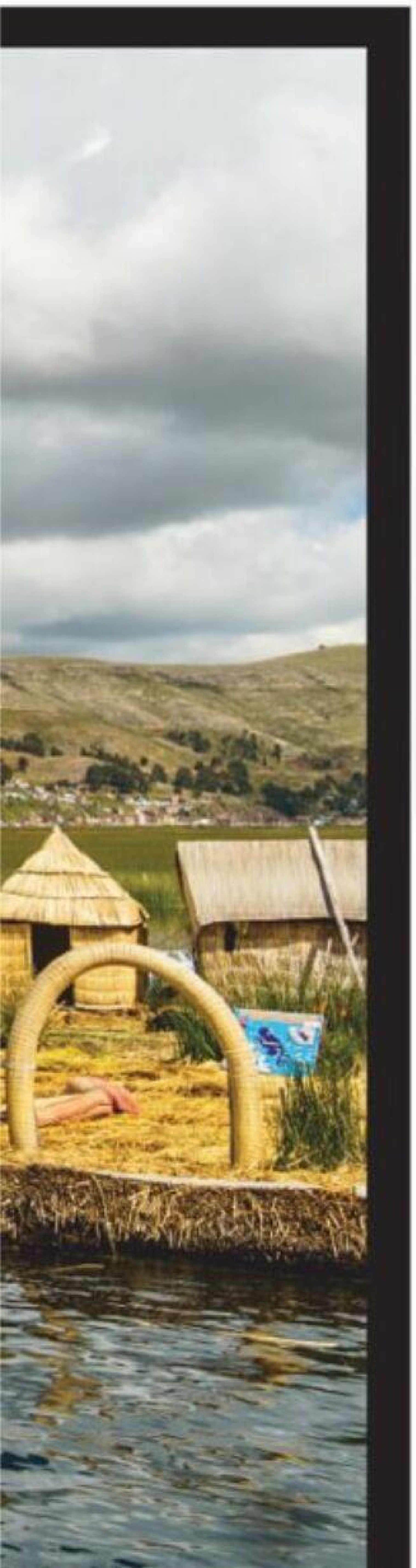
# FLOATING ISLANDS OF UROS

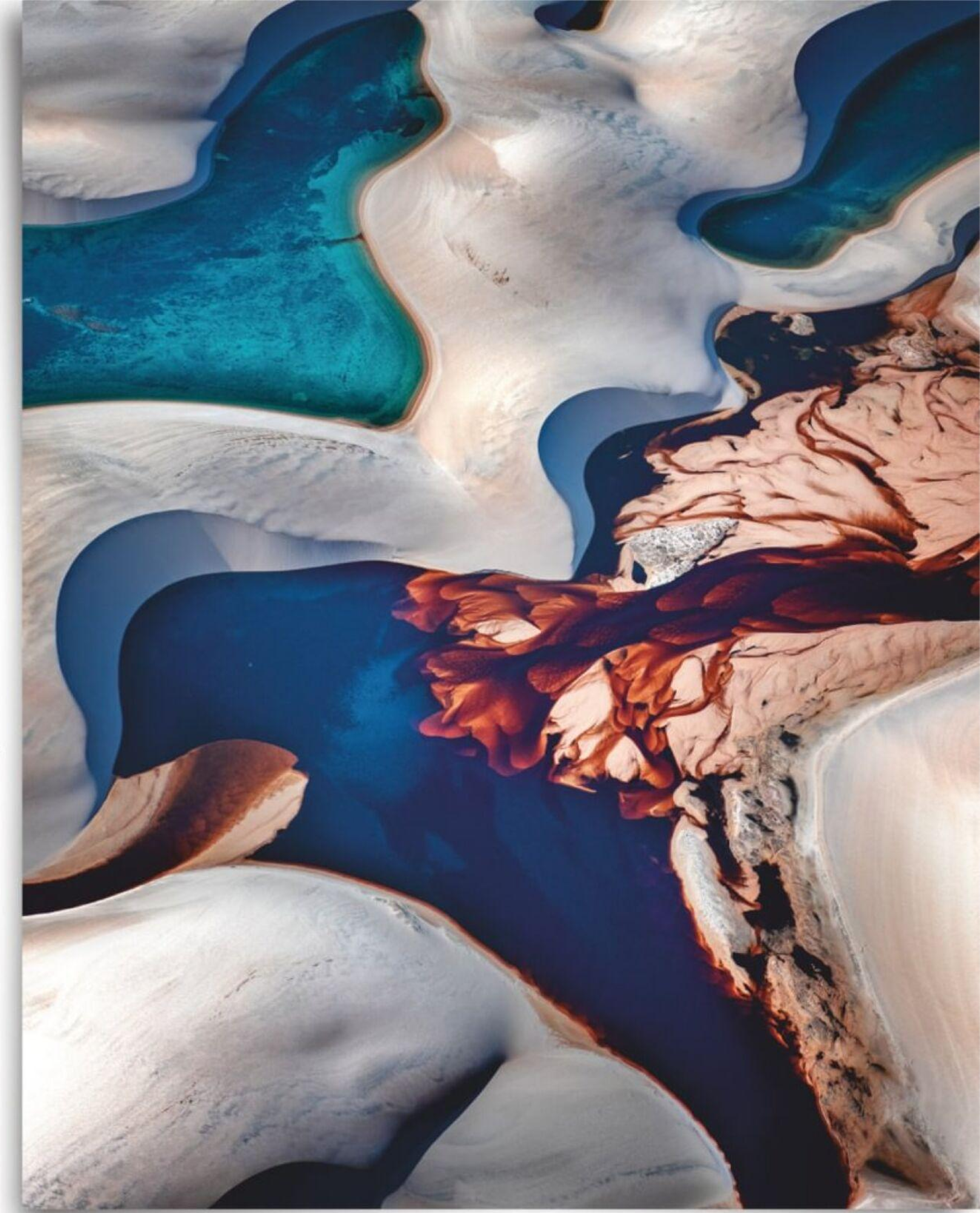
## Peru

**Originally devised to evade the Incas, these 60-plus artificial islands painstakingly made (and remade) of Lake Titicaca's totora reed are home to 1,200 indigenous Uros. While no longer cut off from the rest of the world, the Uros still rely on the waters around them for food and medicines, and also utilize the reeds to weave their distinctive canoes. Even in surprising Peru, this place is special.**









# Lencois Maranhenses National Park

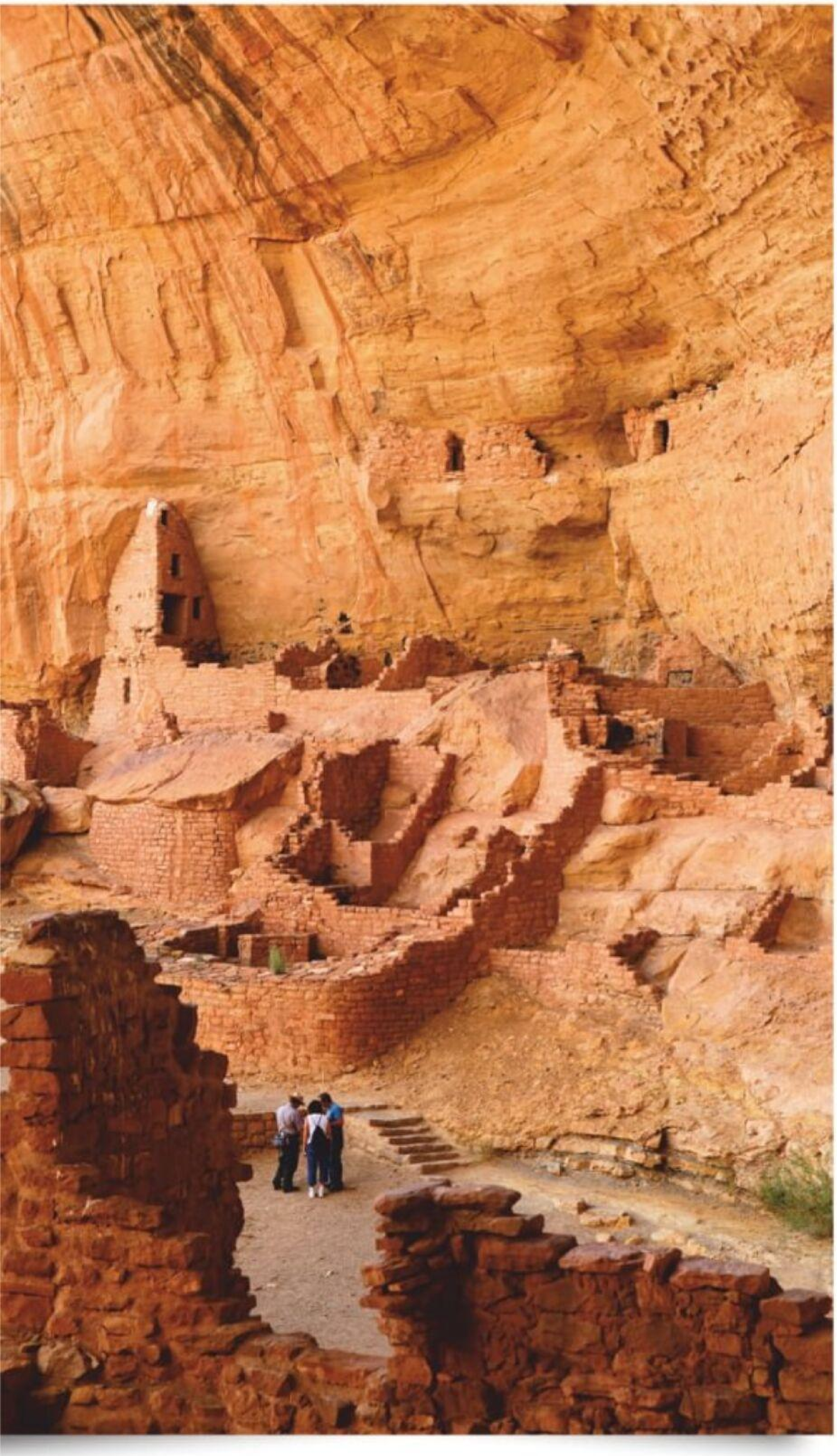
## BRAZIL

**The sand dunes that roll for miles inland from Brazil's northeastern coastline in Maranhão state are striking at any time. Then, come the annual rainy season, the valleys between the dunes fill with rainwater lagoons that can't drain through underlying rock. Until they eventually evaporate, the visual effect is like blue-to-green-to-brown ribbons, and unlike anything else on earth.**

# Cliff Palace

## MESA VERDE NATIONAL PARK, COLORADO

**One has to wonder if the Ancestral Puebloan who first thought of constructing a multi-tiered habitat of 173 square residences and round ceremonial rooms under the shelter of an overhanging cavern roof was regarded initially as a little cuckoo by his people. But 800 years later, it remains both a wonder and a testament to the genius and hardiness of that long-gone culture.**



# Zanzibar

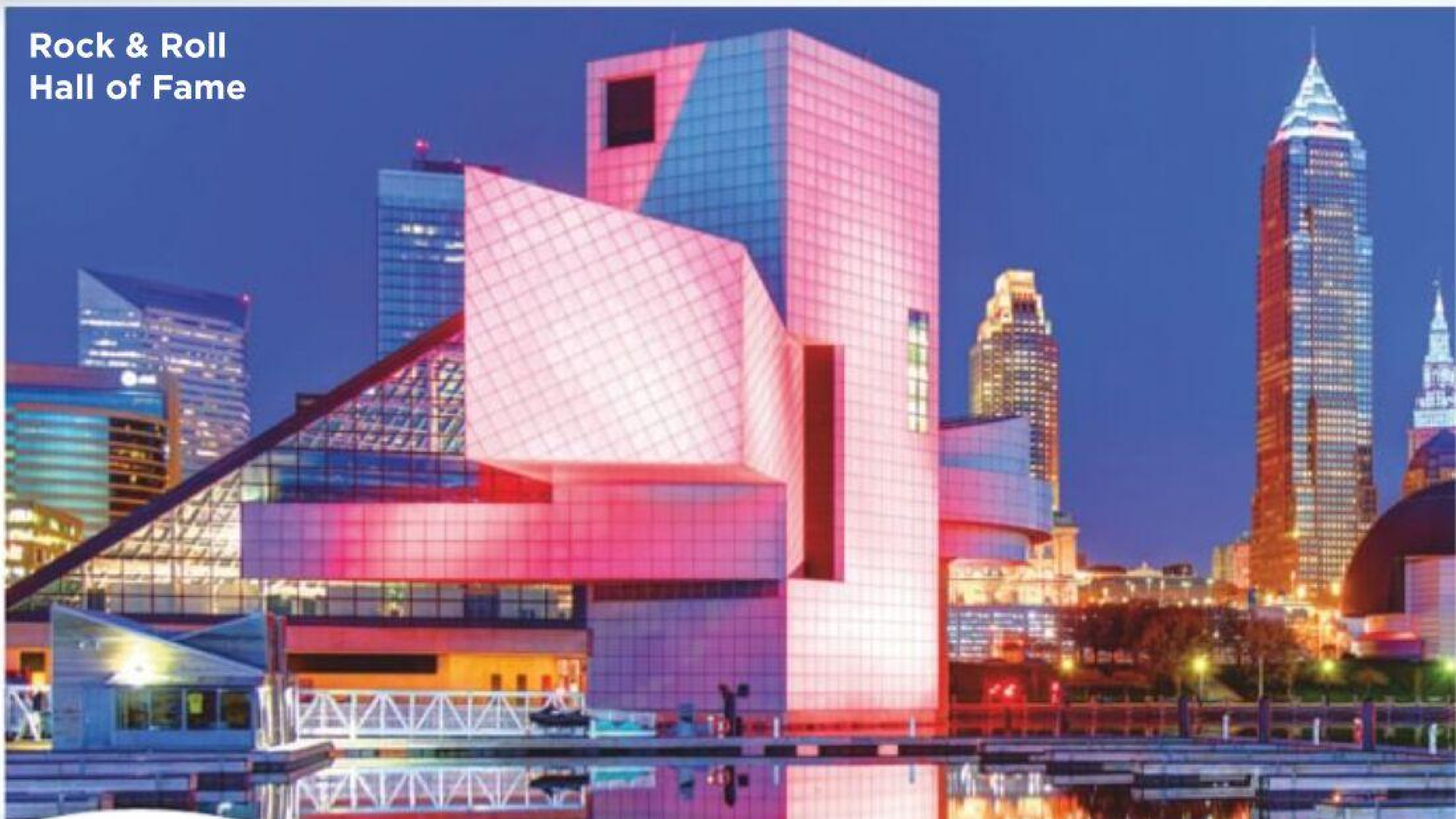
## AFRICA

**Just off the coast of Tanzania lies an archipelago as surprising as it is paradisiacal. Turquoise waters, white sands and swaying palms seem lifted straight from Tahiti, while the cafes and spice markets of colonial old towns are a fascinating amalgam of African, Arabic, Indian and Persian influences. Taking it all in, you'll wonder how this place has been kept secret from you.**

# Halls of Fame

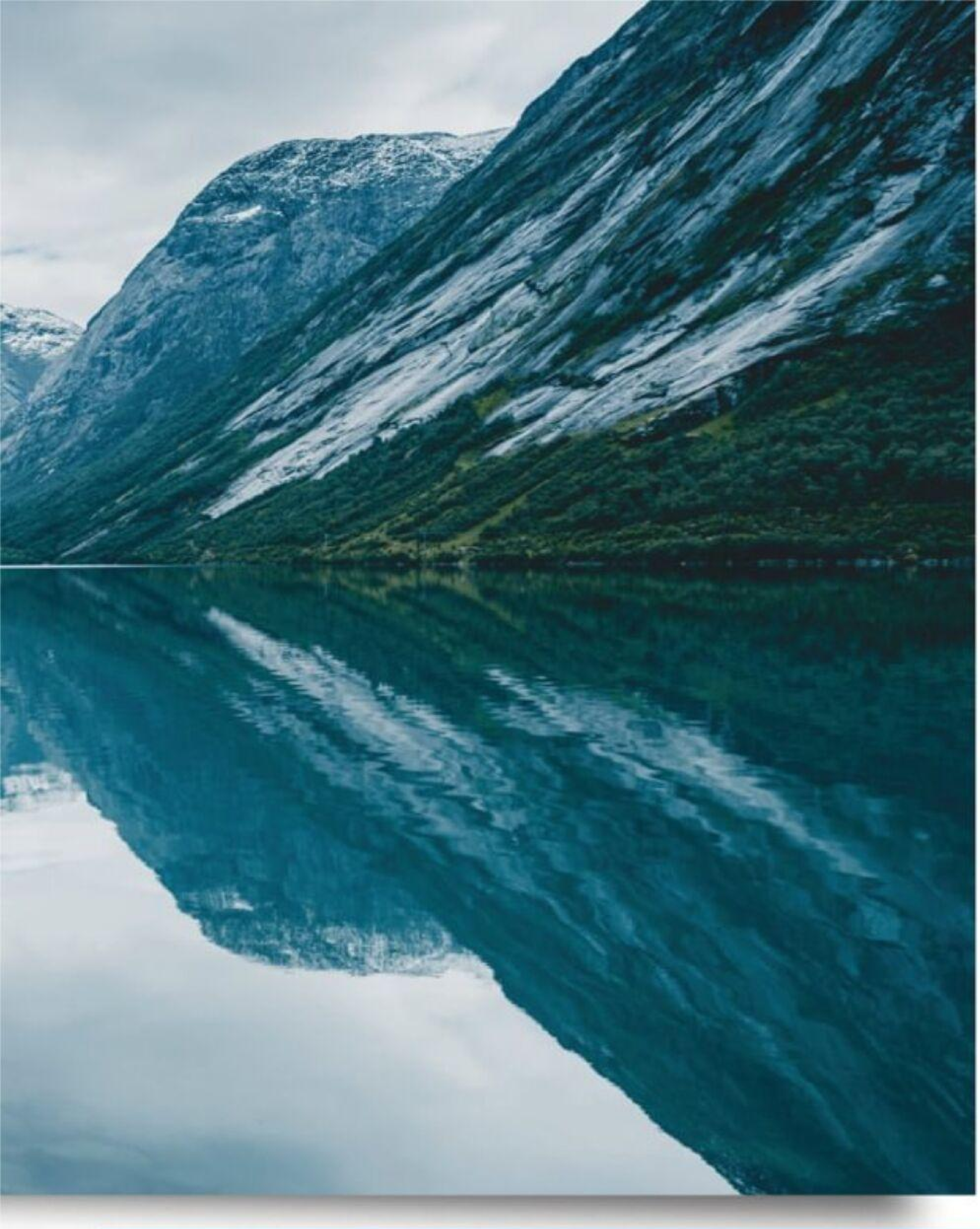
## USA

**Americans love to enshrine our enthusiasms into halls of fame dedicated to everything from space exploration to burlesque dancers. A select few become such grand collections of memorabilia and history that they're worthy of destination status. So if your thing is pro football (Canton, Ohio), pro baseball (Cooperstown, N.Y.), rock 'n' roll (Cleveland) or country music (Nashville), indulge yourself.**



Rock & Roll Hall of Fame

Country Music Hall of Fame



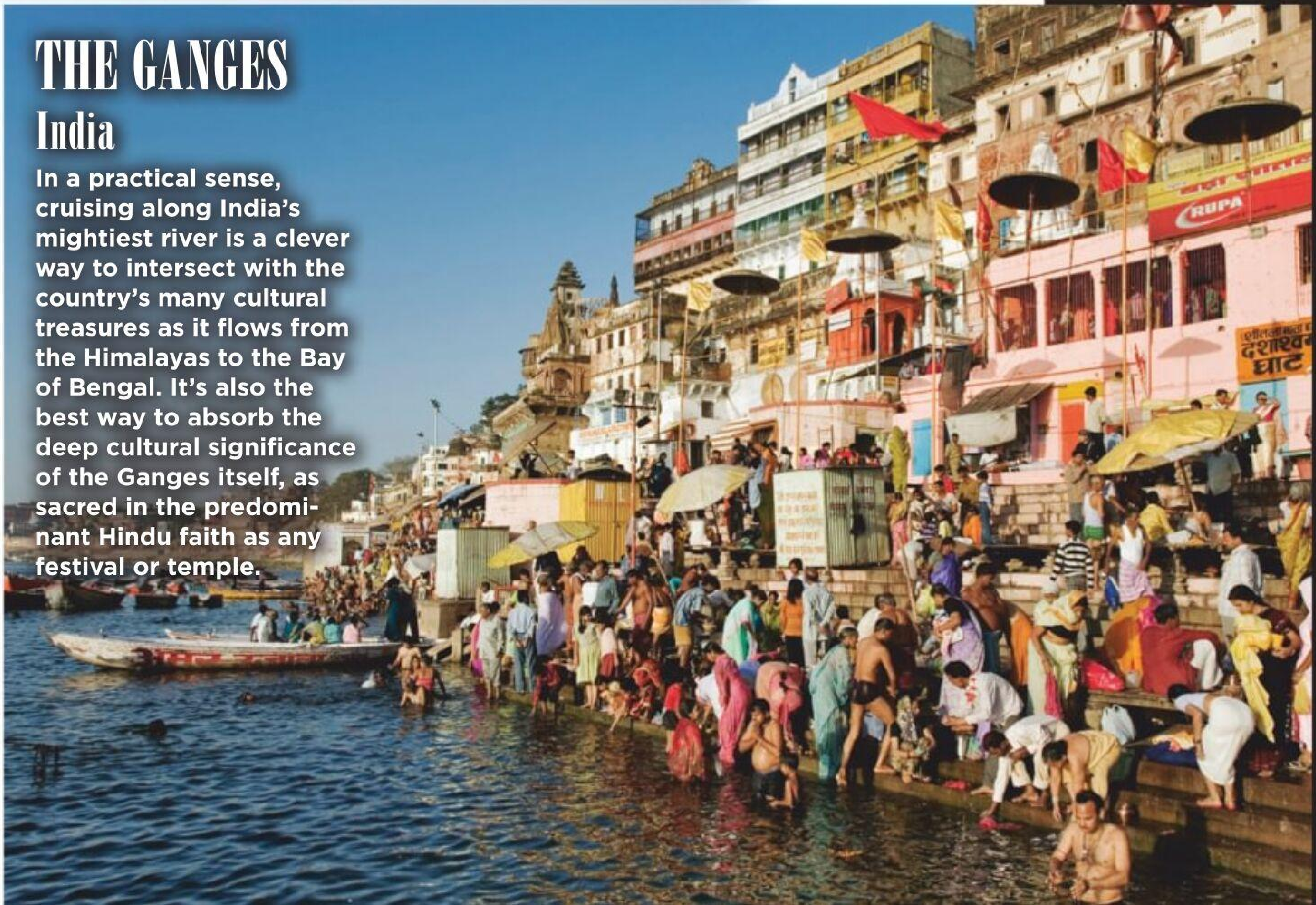
# Norway Fjords

There's a reason why most trips to Norway include a tour of the long, steep-sided ocean inlets that dominate its western coastline—each fjord seems more dramatic than the last, putting you in touch with your inner Viking. Must-sees are Geirangerfjord and Naeroyfjord, considered among the most scenic on the planet, and a boat cruise of 126-mile Sognefjord, the "king of fjords."

## THE GANGES

### India

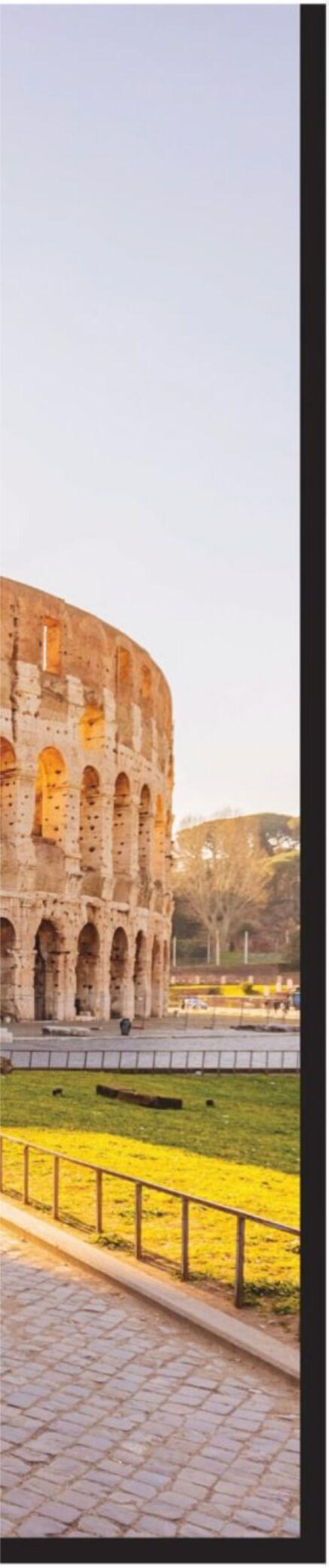
In a practical sense, cruising along India's mightiest river is a clever way to intersect with the country's many cultural treasures as it flows from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. It's also the best way to absorb the deep cultural significance of the Ganges itself, as sacred in the predominant Hindu faith as any festival or temple.



# The Colosseum

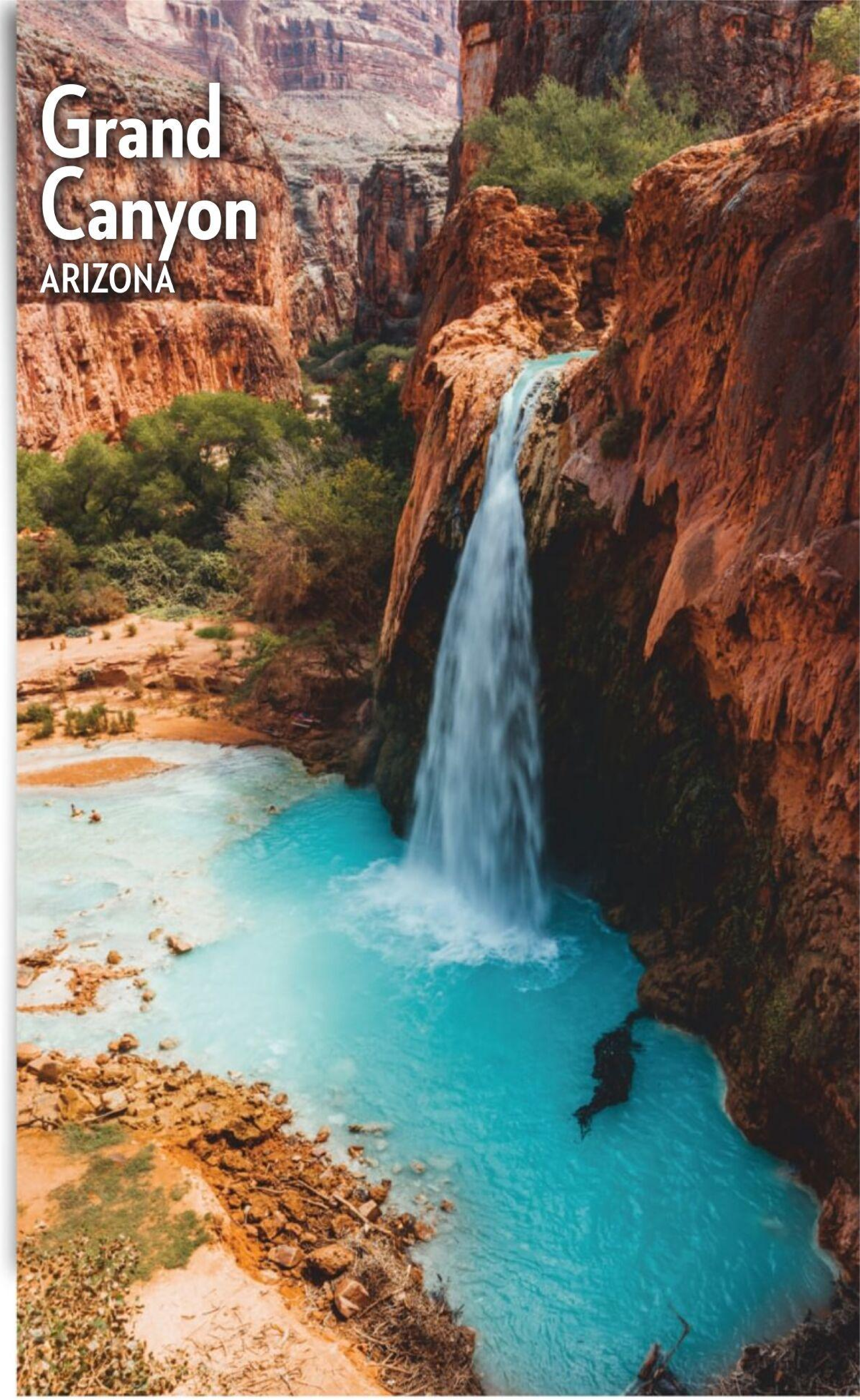
## ROME, ITALY

When can a ruin seem to hum with energy and intensity? When you can walk through an arched entryway and into the 2,000-year-old Colosseum. Viewing its arena floor and terraced grandstands with your own eyes, it becomes easy to picture the gladiatorial combat and exotic animal hunts that thrilled audiences of 50,000 or more Roman citizens—and still fuel popular culture today.



# Grand Canyon

## ARIZONA



If you grow up in America, you likely can't recall when you first learned of the Grand Canyon. The 277-mile-long feature makes as big a mark on our collective consciousness as it does the Western landscape. But to actually stand on its rim, or descend it on a trail, or raft through it on wild waters—that's the only real way to grasp its enormity and beauty.

# Waitomo Glowworm Caves

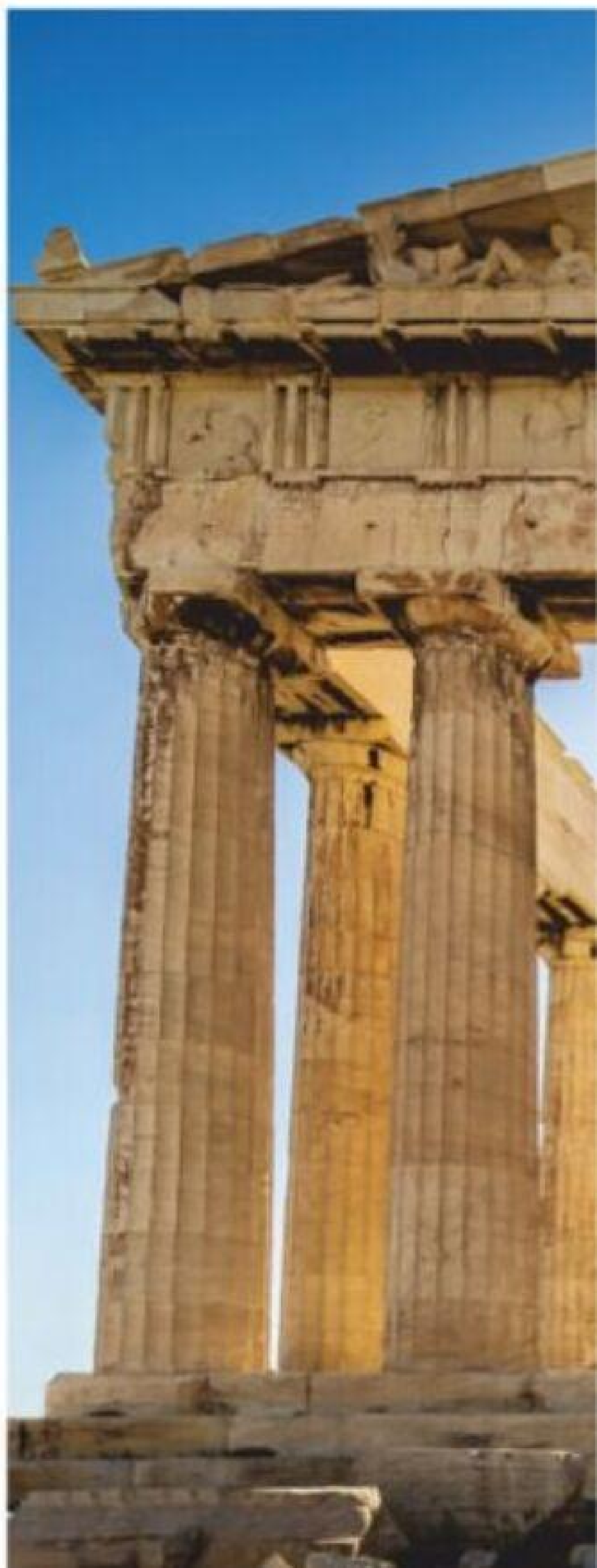
## NEW ZEALAND

Where else on the planet can you climb into a small wooden boat and gently float into a dark, subterranean limestone cave where thousands of bioluminescent worms make the ceiling twinkle like a bluish Milky Way? Given that the *Arachnocampa luminosa* species of glowworm, which emits light to attract flying insects to eat, is found only here, the answer is simple: Nowhere else.

# CINQUE TERRE

## Italy

**You could walk the eight-mile trail that links the area's five neighboring coastal towns in about six hours. But it's much better to pause and enjoy the beach in Monterosso al Mare, admire the medieval lookout tower in Vernazza, order a scoop of local-honey gelato in Corniglia, snap selfies in tiny Manarola, and reward yourself with a glass of wine from Riomaggiore's vineyards.**



# The Acropolis

## ATHENS, GREECE

**For centuries, legends and myths poured down from these imposing temple structures built upon a flat outcropping above Athens, most prominently the iconic Parthenon. So it only seems fitting that so many of us now feel compelled to walk the ancient path up to them with our own sense of awe and wonder. Truly, one of the world's most important cultural monuments.**

# Iceland & Blue Lagoon

FINDING YOURSELF IN HOT WATER IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY IS USUALLY TO BE AVOIDED. UNLESS YOU'RE SOAKING IN WHAT MAY BE THE PLANET'S MOST BEGUILING HOT SPRING.

By Steve Russell

**Blue Lagoon's main soaking pool features a swim-up bar.**

I'm a longtime fan of hot springs. An unabashed devotee of easing my body into geothermally warmed waters and soaking my cares away—and if said soak is touted to deliver other therapeutic benefits, so much the better. Memorable experiences have included floating inside a rustic bathhouse in rural Virginia where Thomas Jefferson once "took the waters" and sinking into a hot tub-size spring naturally perched on the edge of a thawing river in remote coastal British Columbia.

Needless to say, the famously milky-turquoise waters of Blue Lagoon have been a dream destination for a long while, especially because going to the sprawling, volcano-adjacent hot spring means going to Iceland, the Nordic island nation settled 11 centuries ago by Vikings. The plan for my fall-season trip? To traipse around the capital city, Reykjavik, for a couple of days before relocating and relaxing at Blue Lagoon's plush spa.

Iceland Parliament Hotel ends up being an excellent lodging choice in Reykjavik, not just because the front desk checks me in at my red-eye flight's very early arrival of 7:30 a.m. Clean and peaceful, the hotel is near all the city's attractions; indeed, it sits literally next door to the 1881 two-story stone building that still hosts Iceland's governing body. Don't be too surprised: The parliament consists of 63 elected members representing the country's total population of just 380,000 people.

More than half that number call the Reykjavik area home, so even though the city is small enough to be walkable, there are plenty of people on the streets. Plenty of American and European tourists, too—I'm picking up the crosscurrent of accents on the way to Harpa, the harborside concert hall clad with a striking modernist façade of overlapping glass bricks. I'm here to join a three-hour walking "foodie" tour that will allow me to learn the city's layout while stuffing my face with local fare. A young guide cheerfully shepherds the small group from eatery to eatery, where we sample casserole-like cod stew atop rye bread, smoked lamb, Icelandic hot dogs smothered in a remoulade-like sauce, and a unique rye bread ice cream. (Icelanders love their rye bread.) Most of us also elect to try a tiny cube of fermented shark, a traditional food with a backstory of starvation and poisoning. It's predictably rank, but I consider the advice to swallow it quickly as a challenge, enduring 32 chews before I wash it down with beer.

After a much-needed nap, I squeeze as much as possible into my remaining time in Reykjavik. Navigating

**The Esja mountain range as seen from Seltjarnarnes Peninsula near Reykjavik, Iceland.**

wide avenues and narrow side streets with map in hand (yes, an actual paper map), I maintain my bearings by sighting Hallgrimskirkja Church, a towering concrete edifice that resembles a cross between the Chrysler building and a sorcerer's fortress. A stroll along the waterfront rewards with views of choppy Faxafloi Bay and the snow-blanketed slopes of Akranes Peninsula beyond. Wherever I meander, I learn to expect the weather to shift quickly from blue and sunny to gray and drizzly and back again. Rainy patches give me an excuse to peruse neighborhood markets that stock an impressive variety of candy, including the Icelandic oddity of chocolate-covered black licorice, or duck into pubs for an afternoon pint. During one minor squall, I even seek refuge in the Iceland Punk Museum, a suitably grungy ode to the country's history with the music genre, located in a former public toilet. My best find, however, ends up being Icelandic Street Food, a casual restaurant that serves all-you-can-eat seafood soup.

Growing comfortable with Reykjavik, I even hop a public bus on a route to the outlying Seltjarnarnes Peninsula for a hike through a seaside nature reserve surrounding a 19th-century lighthouse. And that's where I get caught in a cold, steady rain that soaks me to my thermal underwear. As far as I'm concerned, such moments are just a part of adventurous travel. Shivering on the bus ride back into town, however, I tell myself that I've now earned a trip to Blue Lagoon.

Was Blue Lagoon, with its black volcanic rock and numerous pools of robin's egg-hued water, made by man or nature? The answer is yes.

As a land of volcanoes and geysers, Iceland long has been at the forefront of harnessing natural resources for heating and other energy uses. When a geothermal power plant was constructed 30 miles southwest of Reykjavik on the Reykjanes Peninsula in 1976, heated subterranean seawater was vented into the surrounding lava field. The color of that water was a surprise, the result of abundant chalk-white silica brought up from underlying geological layers. A few years later, a worker from the plant who took a dip in the hot spring experienced a dramatic improvement in his psoriasis, and an attraction was born. As the destination grew in popularity with Icelanders and tourists, amenities have been added, including a swim-up bar, two lagoon-front hotels, several dining options, and a full spa.

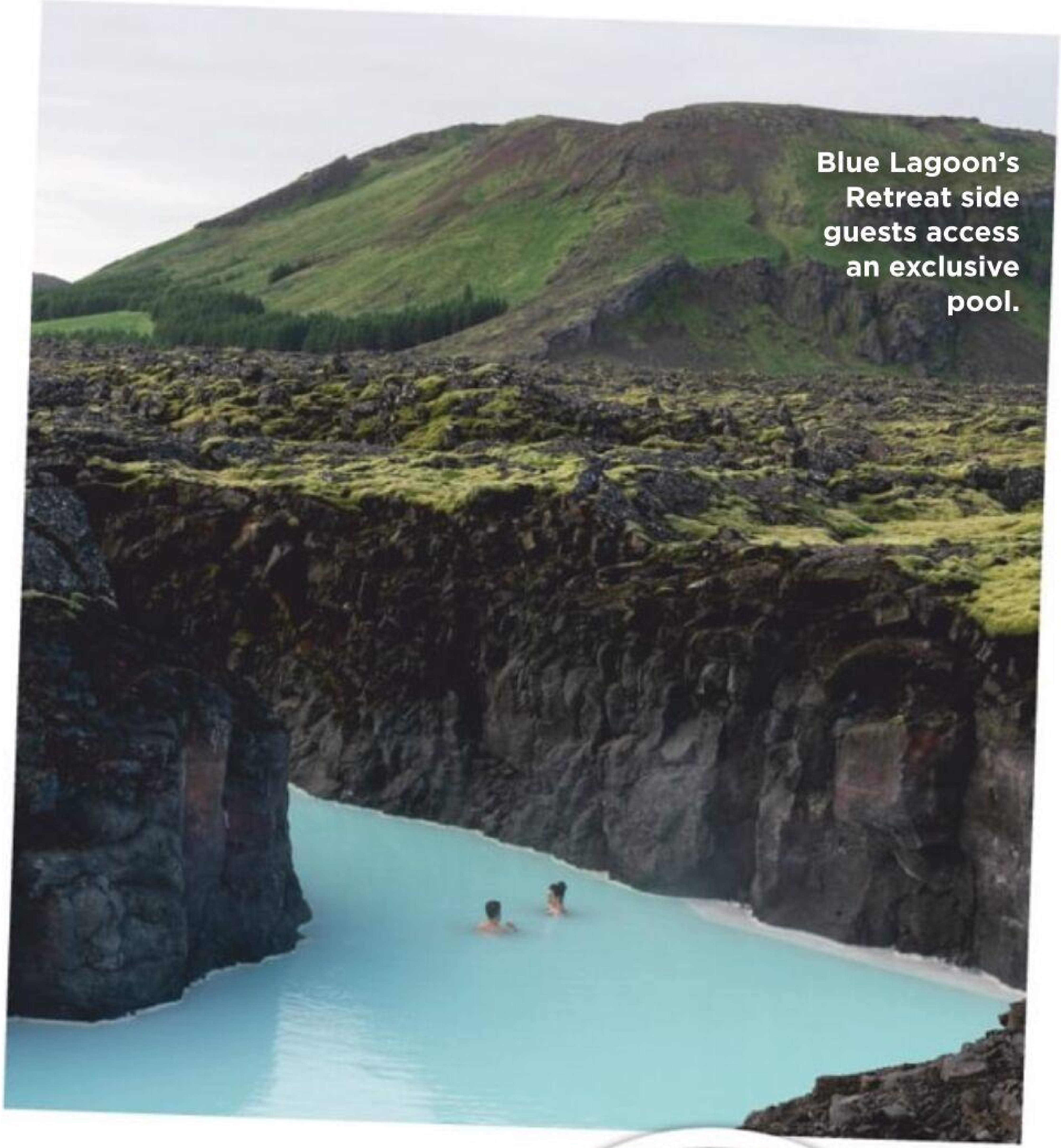
The floor-to-ceiling window of my modern-yet-cozy room in The

Suite room at Blue Lagoon.

Retreat Hotel overlooks a peaceful finger of the lagoon and the moss-draped moonscape that stretches beyond. Frankly, I'm already feeling spoiled, and I haven't yet dipped a toe into the water. Committed to not rushing anything while I'm here, I linger over a cup of coffee in the lobby, especially after it arrives accompanied by a tiered stand of petit fours. Dusk passes before I don a swimsuit and slip from the cold night air into the 100ºF water. This side of the complex is restricted to Retreat guests, so I encounter few others as I explore its series of smaller, interconnected pools. Residual travel stress ebbing away, I lose track of time before falling into easy conversation with a winery-owning couple from Novia Scotia and a small group of visitors from Japan. Gazing upward, I think I discern a greenish tint to the starry sky. Then a breeze parts the steam that drifts over from the geothermal plant and we all see it clearly—a shifting, shimmering ribbon of emerald tinged in purple. Soaking in a hot spring while viewing the Northern Lights for the first time? It doesn't get much better.

Occasionally, the same primal forces that created Blue Lagoon and replace its 1.6 million gallons of water every two days choose to remind everyone who's boss. A smallish volcano is located less than two miles away, and a series of eruptions, complete with tremors and an encroaching lava flow, forced several weeks of closures between November 2023 and December 2024. Even so, Blue Lagoon exhibits obvious pride in its craggy habitat, down to the exposed volcanic walls of the partially subterranean and wholly luxurious Retreat Spa. That's where I find myself undertaking "the ritual," in which I rub my body with creamy silica, green algae and coarse salt to exfoliate the skin and stimulate circulation. It's a popular treatment, but I'm more of a sweat-it-out guy, so I rotate between wet and dry saunas and the outdoor (very) cold plunge pool. Back in my comfy spa robe, I survey serene

**Blue Lagoon is frequently treated to a Northern Lights show.**



Blue Lagoon's Retreat side guests access an exclusive pool.

Gourmet bites at Michelin-starred Moss restaurant.

relaxation nooks that include one with a fireplace before nearly nodding off in a cocoon-like hanging nest chair.

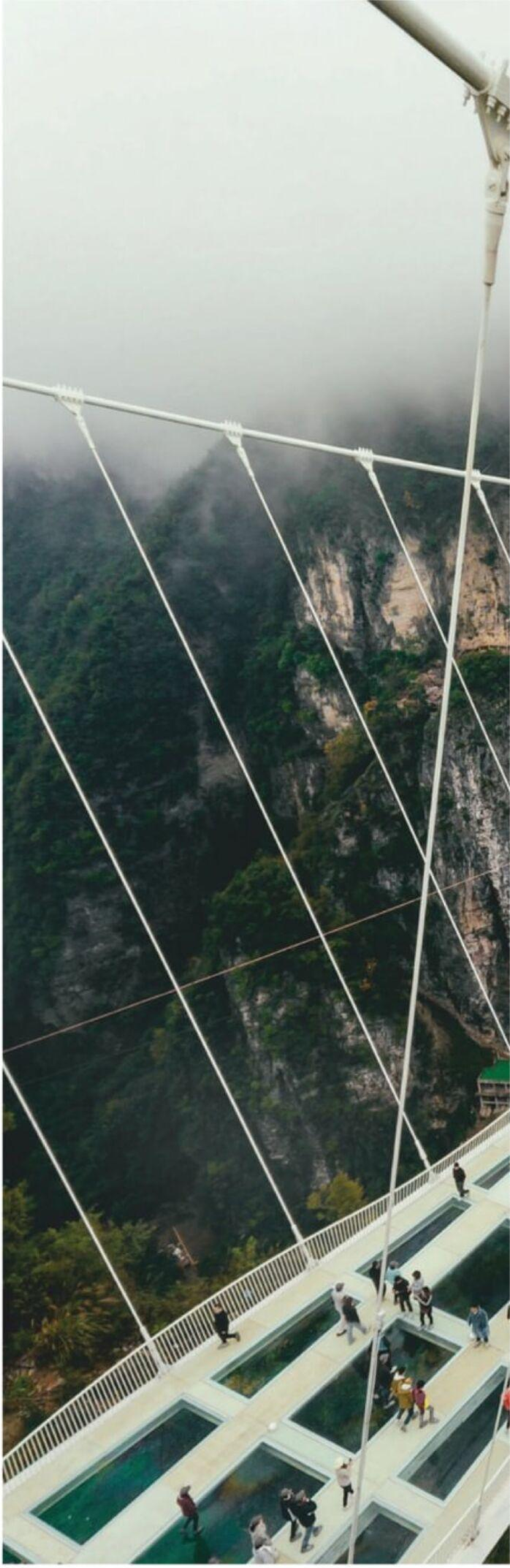
Concluding a day of total indulgence, I dine at Moss, the Retreat's Michelin-starred restaurant helmed by chef Aggi Sverrisson. The seven-course, tasting-menu dinner is a feast for the palate and the eyes, from the bowl of beet soup served amid puffs of dry ice smoke to the dessert of bite-size confections perched dramatically atop a lava rock.

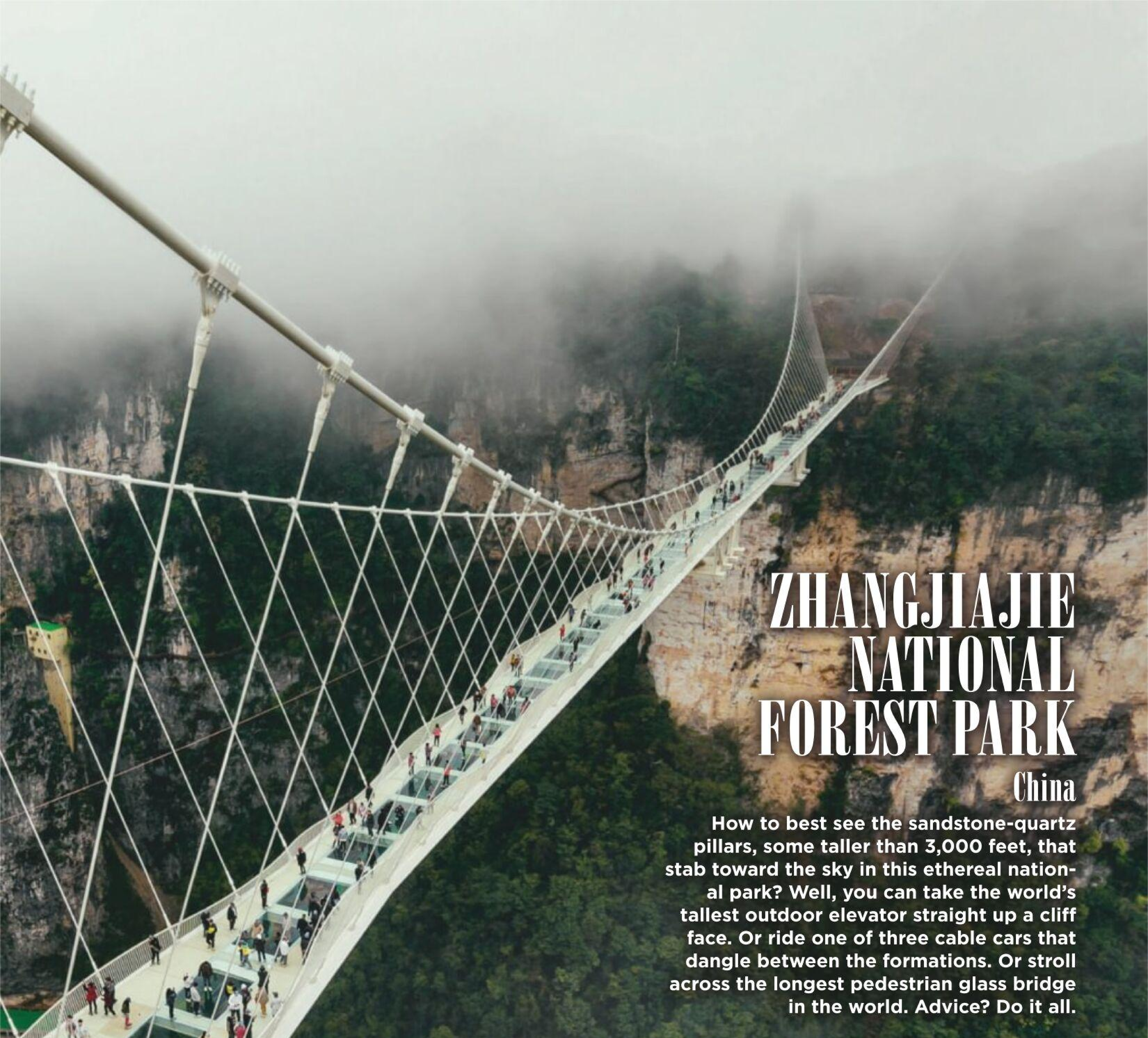
I wake well before dawn on my last morning, thinking I hear thunder. Actually, the rattle is my window being buffeted by a stiff wind that has brought sleet with it. While the coffee machine gurgles, I formulate a plan, and soon tread through the hushed spa and its secret door that swings open onto the immense pool beyond the Retreat border. This is the Blue Lagoon's most well-known zone, accessible to busloads of day trippers intent on taking selfies and hitting the swim-up bar. But at this very early hour, in this weather, I have the whole milky-blue, steam-shrouded expanse almost to myself. Tilting my exposed face away from the sting of sleet, I soak in the geothermal heat, and the moment. Such conditions may not be for everyone. But for me, this is pure bliss. And pure Iceland.

# Barcelona

## SPAIN

**From brilliant architecture to beautiful beaches to delectable cuisine, there's almost too much to see and do in Spain's second largest city. No better place to start than the Gothic Quarter, the old-city center off the Mediterranean seafront. Wander its labyrinthine streets until they open onto beloved La Rambla, a tree-line pedestrian avenue that again forces a choice: Which café offers the best people watching?**

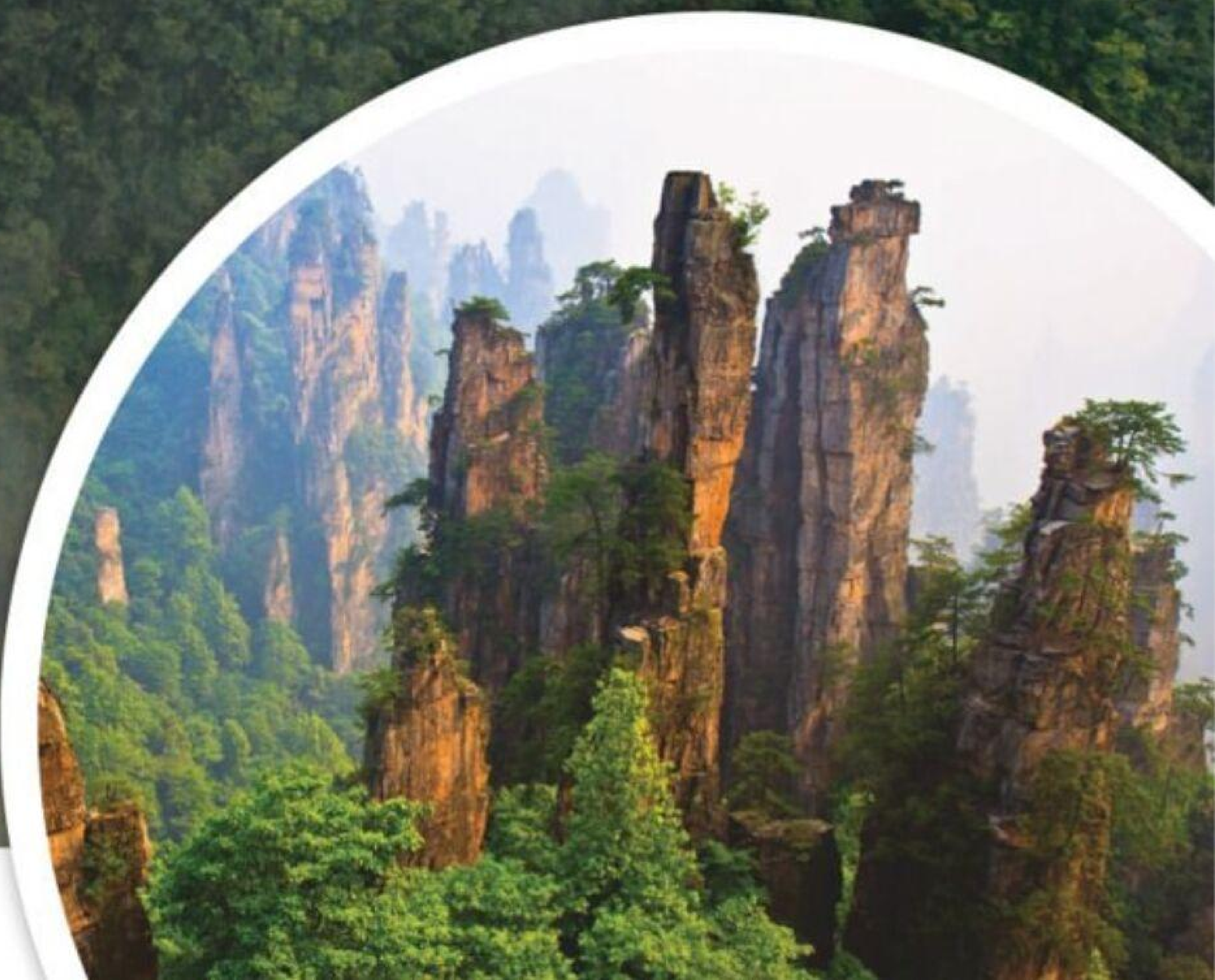




# ZHANGJIAJIE NATIONAL FOREST PARK

## China

How to best see the sandstone-quartz pillars, some taller than 3,000 feet, that stab toward the sky in this ethereal national park? Well, you can take the world's tallest outdoor elevator straight up a cliff face. Or ride one of three cable cars that dangle between the formations. Or stroll across the longest pedestrian glass bridge in the world. Advice? Do it all.



# Khiva

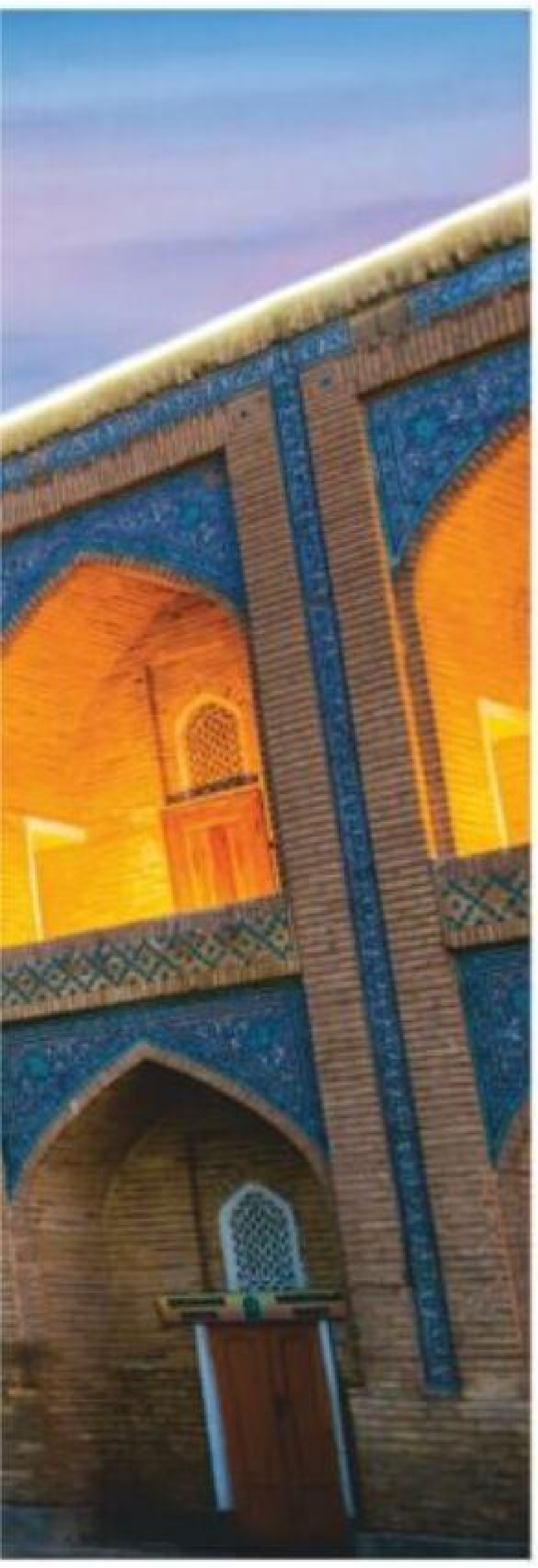
## UZBEKISTAN

**Even centuries after it faded, mention of the Silk Road trade route that connected China to Europe conjures daydreams of intrigue and adventure. Live out those daydreams by traveling in the tracks of desert caravans to the remarkable Central Asian city of Khiva, where you'll marvel at the preservation of crenellated fortress walls, the towering Khohja Minaret and the royal palace complete with harem quarters.**

# GALAPAGOS

## Ecuador

**Charles Darwin famously journeyed to this equatorial island group 560 miles off the coast of Ecuador to study its unique animal species and develop his theory of evolution. You'll go there for the same reason, to view penguins, sea lions, blue-footed boobies, marine iguanas and giant tortoises in unspoiled surroundings. And in the end, the evolution might be your own.**



# Colca Canyon

## PERU

**Even without its ample bird-watching opportunities, one of the world's deepest canyons would be worth exploring for its sweeping mountain vistas, natural hot springs and stepped terraces farmed by indigenous communities. That said, of course you're going to wind up at the Cruz del Condor lookout, where visitors can thrill to the sight of huge Andean condors spreading their wings and gliding on thermal updrafts high above the valley floor.**

# NGORONGORO CRATER

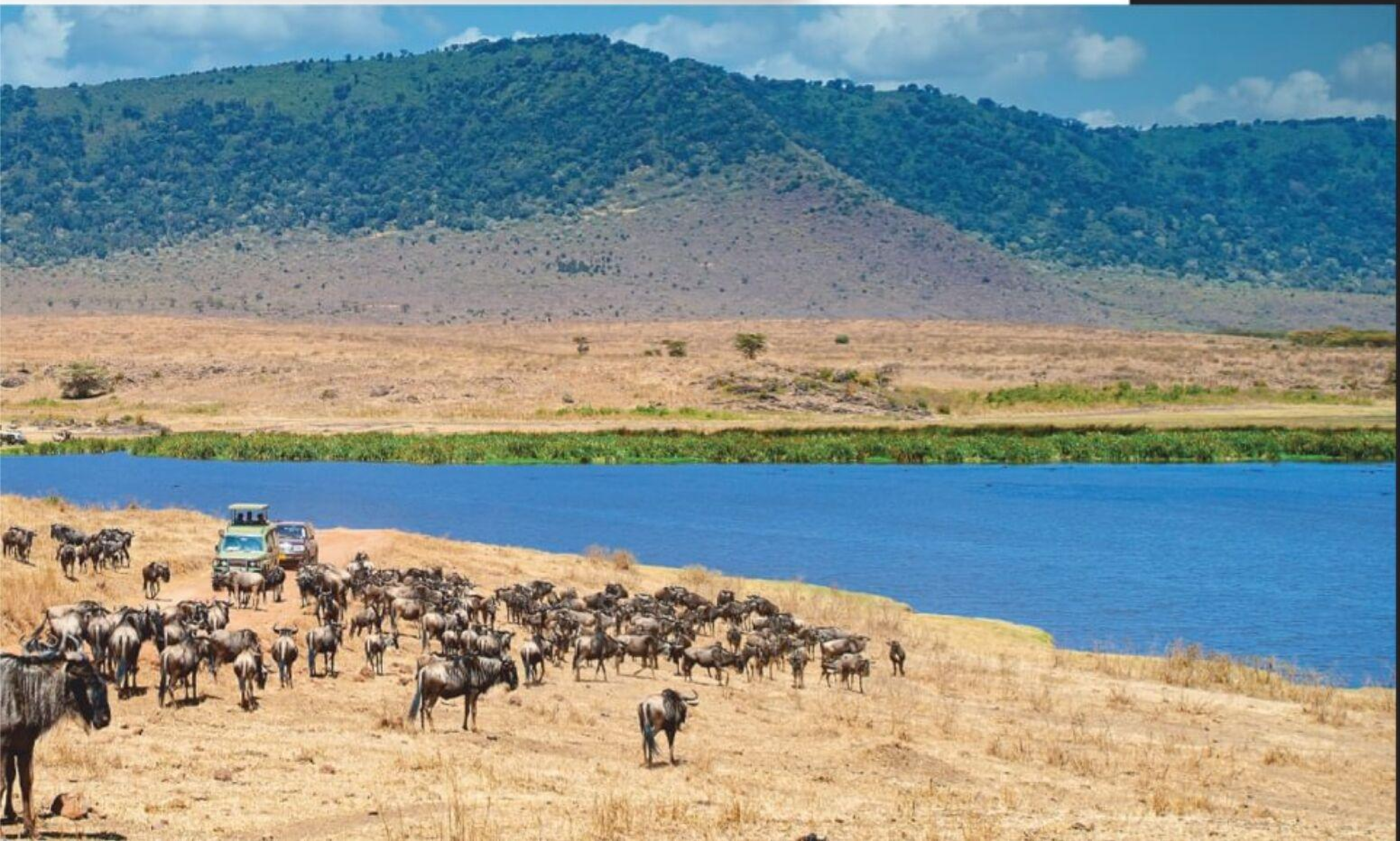
## Tanzania

**The geography alone is stunning—a forested rim descending onto a vast, open plain formed by a collapsed volcano. Millions of years later, that caldera supports a grassland ecosystem that includes elephants, rhinos, giraffes, zebras, gazelles, cheetahs and the highest concentration of lions in the world. See them on safari by day and hear their roars from your tented camp at night.**

# Easter Island

## POLYNESIA

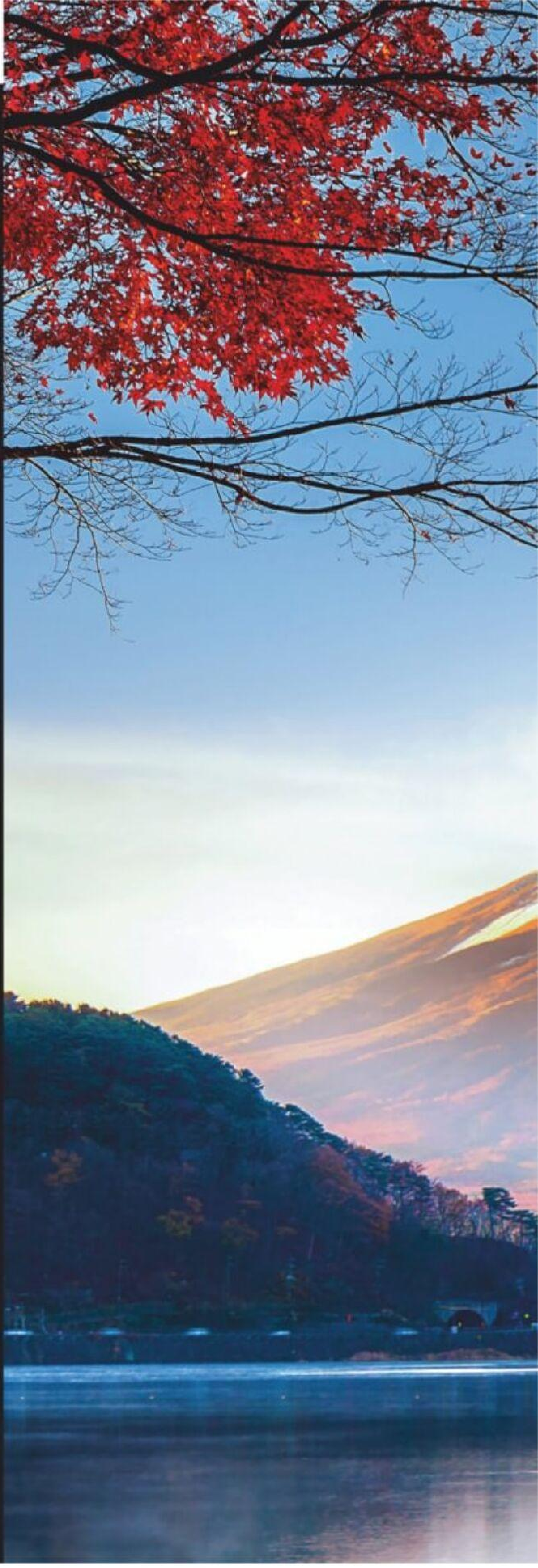
**Some theorize that the Rapa Nui people brought about their own destruction by deforesting their South Pacific island home to provide logs needed to roll hundreds of huge moai statues into place. Others argue the cause was contact with Europeans and Peruvian slave traders. The surviving moai undoubtedly know the answer to the mystery. But they remain stone faced.**



# Oaxaca

## MEXICO

**Mountainous geography and a large population of indigenous peoples lend the state of Oaxaca its own distinct culture within Mexico, exhibited in food, handcrafts and clothing. Most striking among local traditions are elaborate Day of the Dead (Dia de Muertos) celebrations, when residents combine traditional dress with startling skull makeup, and cemeteries become communal spaces filled with flowers and candles. Macabre and magical.**



# Mount Fuji

## JAPAN

**The great Japanese artist Hokusai must have been a bit obsessed to produce 36 woodblock prints devoted to views of Mount Fuji in the 1830s, including *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. And why not? Fuji's soaring, graceful, snow-capped conical form has an almost hypnotizing effect on the eye. Indeed, the downside to trekking to its peak is that you no longer see the mountain. Think about it.**

# HALONG BAY

## Vietnam

**The 1,600 monolith-like limestone islands that seem pushed up from the bay like jungle-smothered pieces of jade are surreally beautiful on their own. They also deliver the effect of turning the bay into a green-water labyrinth that makes every bend an adventure, complete with floating fishing villages. Bonus points for sailing this UNESCO World Heritage site aboard a traditional Vietnamese junk.**

## MALTA

**From the time of the ancient Phoenicians through WWII, this small island situated between Sicily and North Africa has played an outsized role in history, especially during the two centuries it was ruled by an order of knights. Capital city Valletta radiates that history with its fortified walls that rise from the Mediterranean and earth-toned Baroque architecture that seems hewn from the island itself.**

## Souk Semmarine

### MARRAKECH, MOROCCO

The ancient marketplace of exotic Marrakech is the place to go if you want to sharpen your haggling skills over handbags, carpets, brass lanterns, pottery, spices, perfumes and honestly, just about anything else. Make sure to visit adjacent souks where blacksmiths and textile dyers labor. If you wear out your shoes trying to see it all, there are plenty of those here, too.

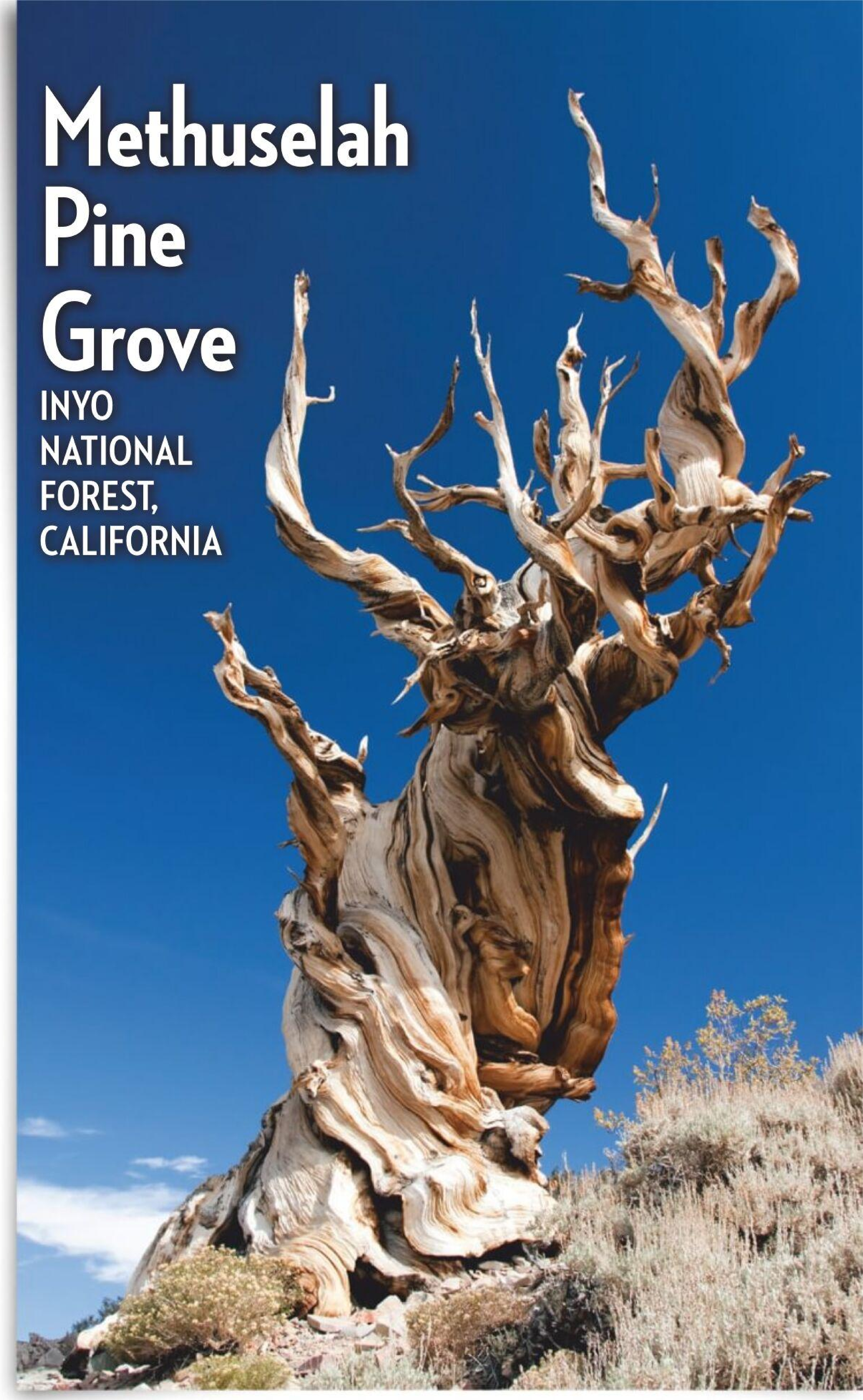
# Isle of Skye

## SCOTLAND

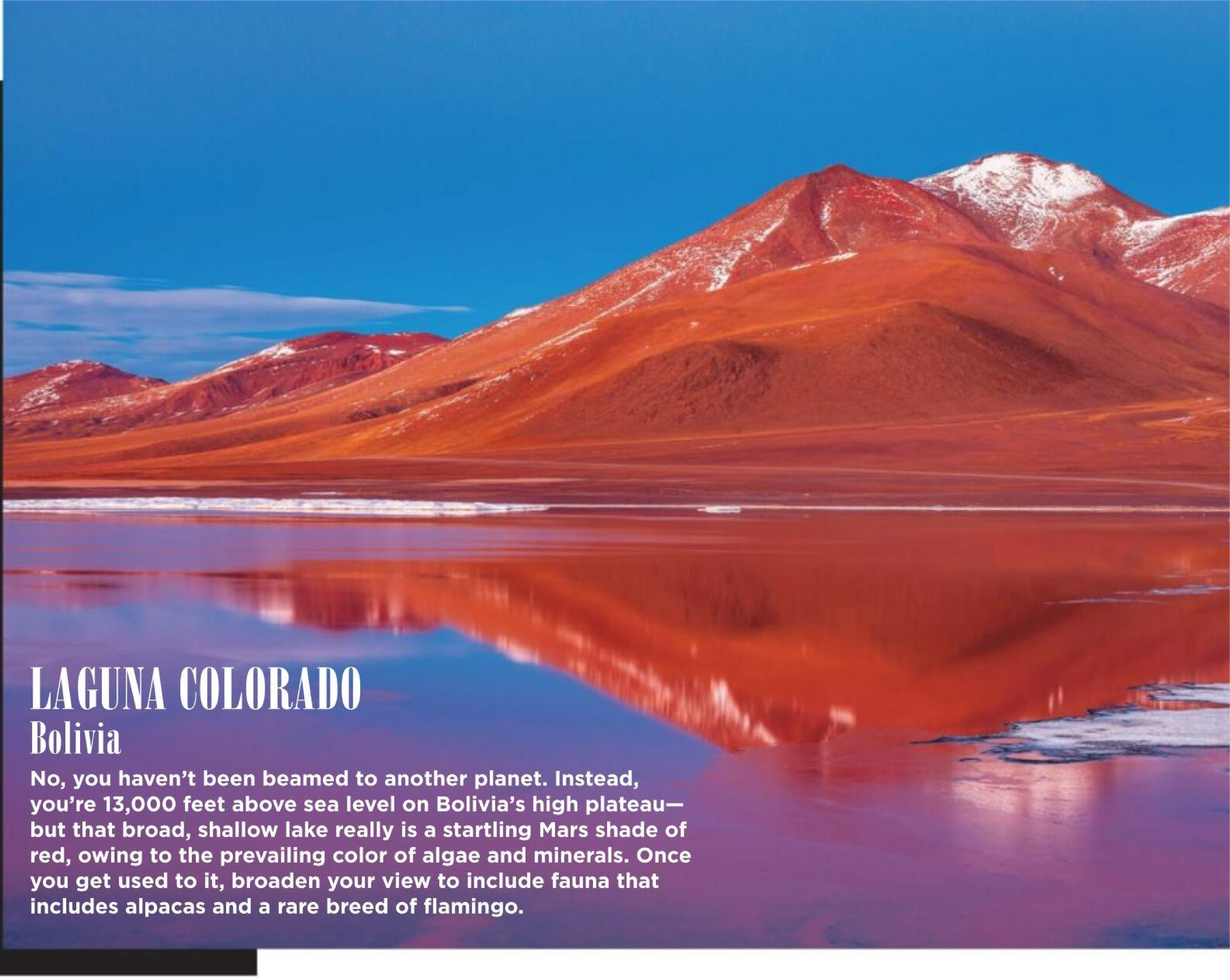
There's Scotland, and then there's its second-largest isle upon which everything we consider Scottish seems amplified. For dramatic scenery, there are the towering rock pinnacles of the Quiraing and the Old Man of Storr. For medieval structures, there are Eilean Donan Castle and Dunvegan Castle, seat of storied Clan MacLeod. And for charming villages, there's seaside Portree. Order the fish and chips and linger.

# Methuselah Pine Grove

## INYO NATIONAL FOREST, CALIFORNIA



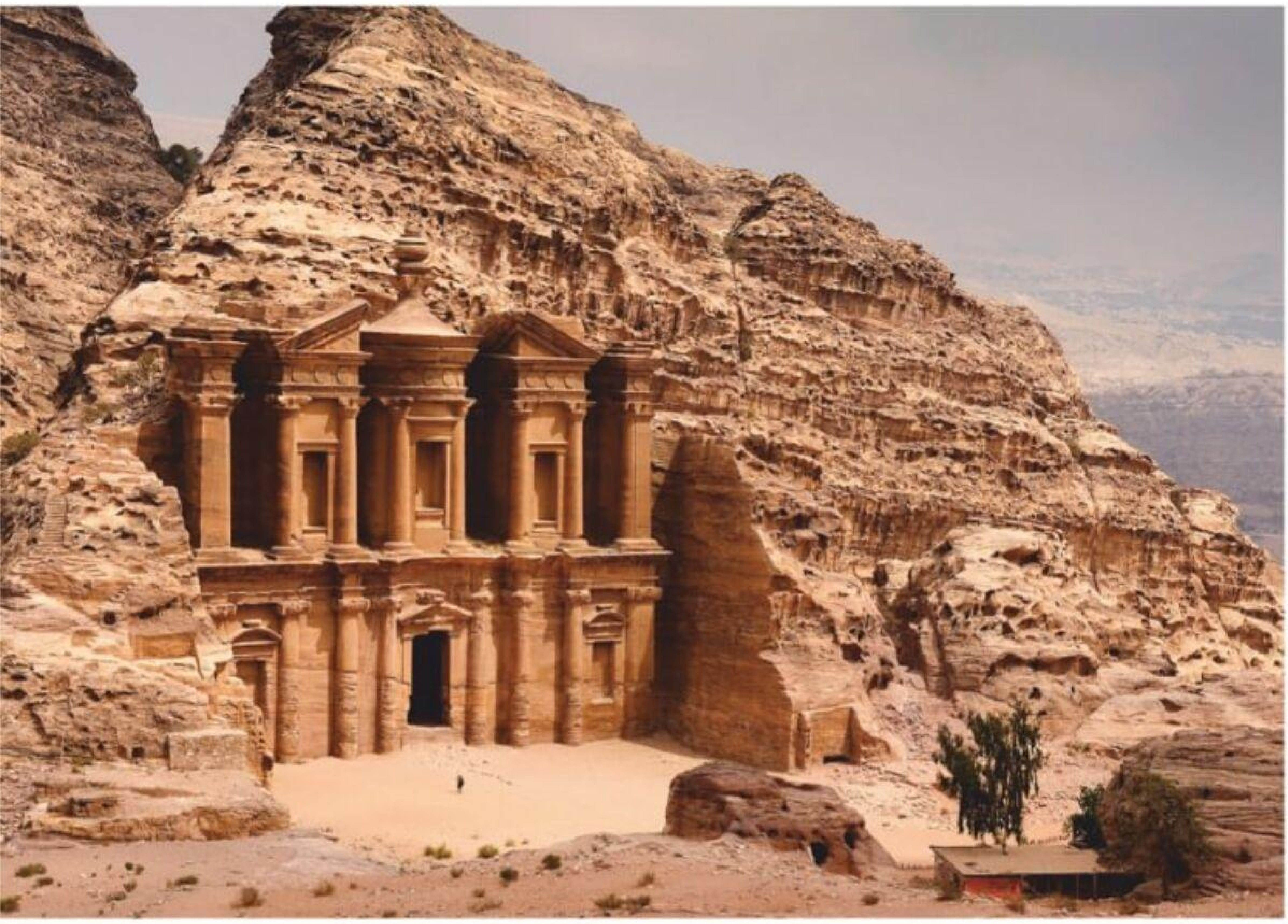
High in California's White Mountains grows the Great Basin bristlecone pine, a long-living species known for artfully gnarled trunks and branches. Within Inyo National Forest is a grove of these special trees, and within that grove is Methuselah, a 4,800-year-old bristlecone pine thought to be the oldest living tree in the world. For protection, Methuselah is wisely unmarked, but its presence is felt.



## LAGUNA COLORADO

### Bolivia

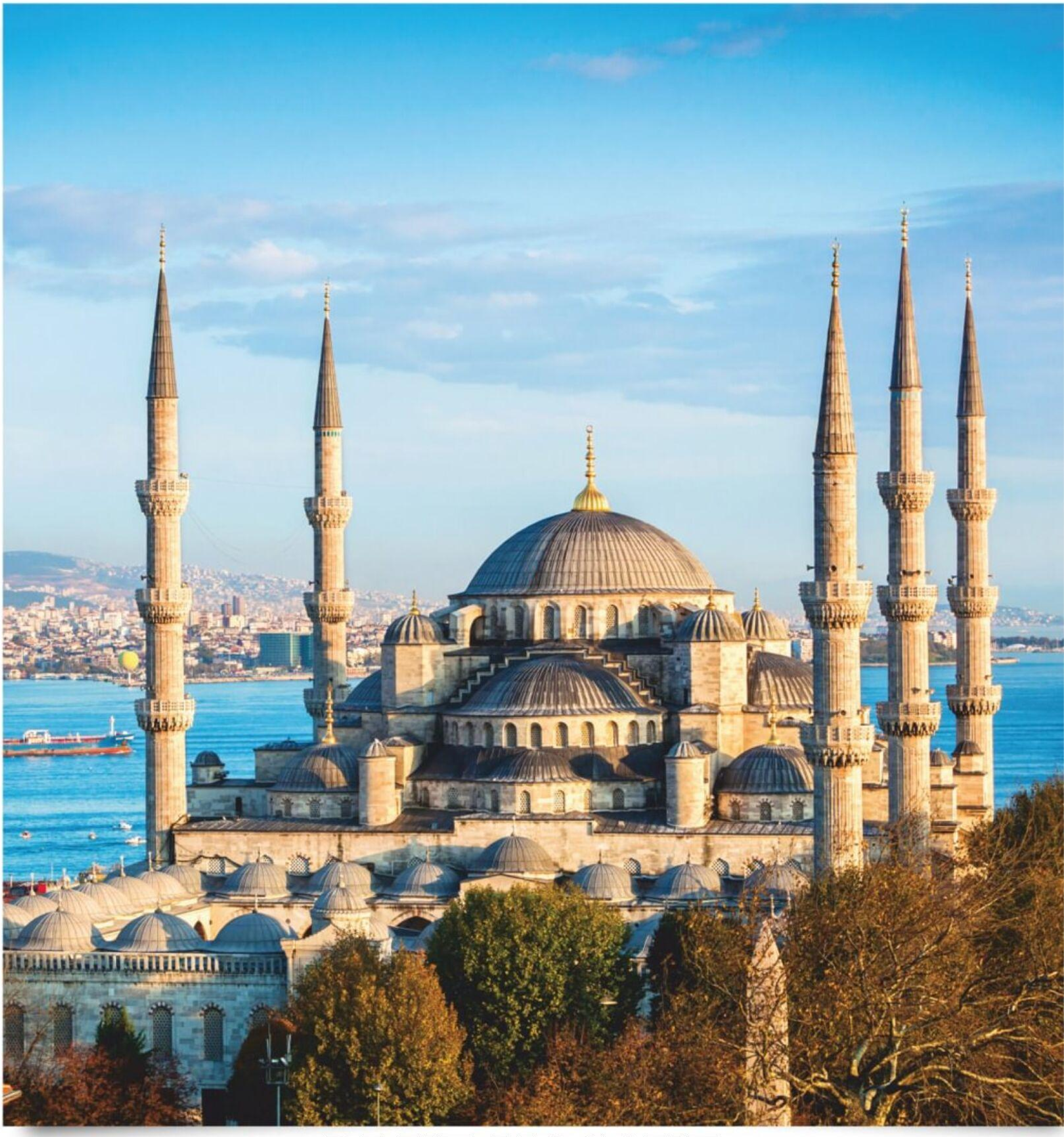
**No, you haven't been beamed to another planet. Instead, you're 13,000 feet above sea level on Bolivia's high plateau—but that broad, shallow lake really is a startling Mars shade of red, owing to the prevailing color of algae and minerals. Once you get used to it, broaden your view to include fauna that includes alpacas and a rare breed of flamingo.**



## Petra

### JORDAN

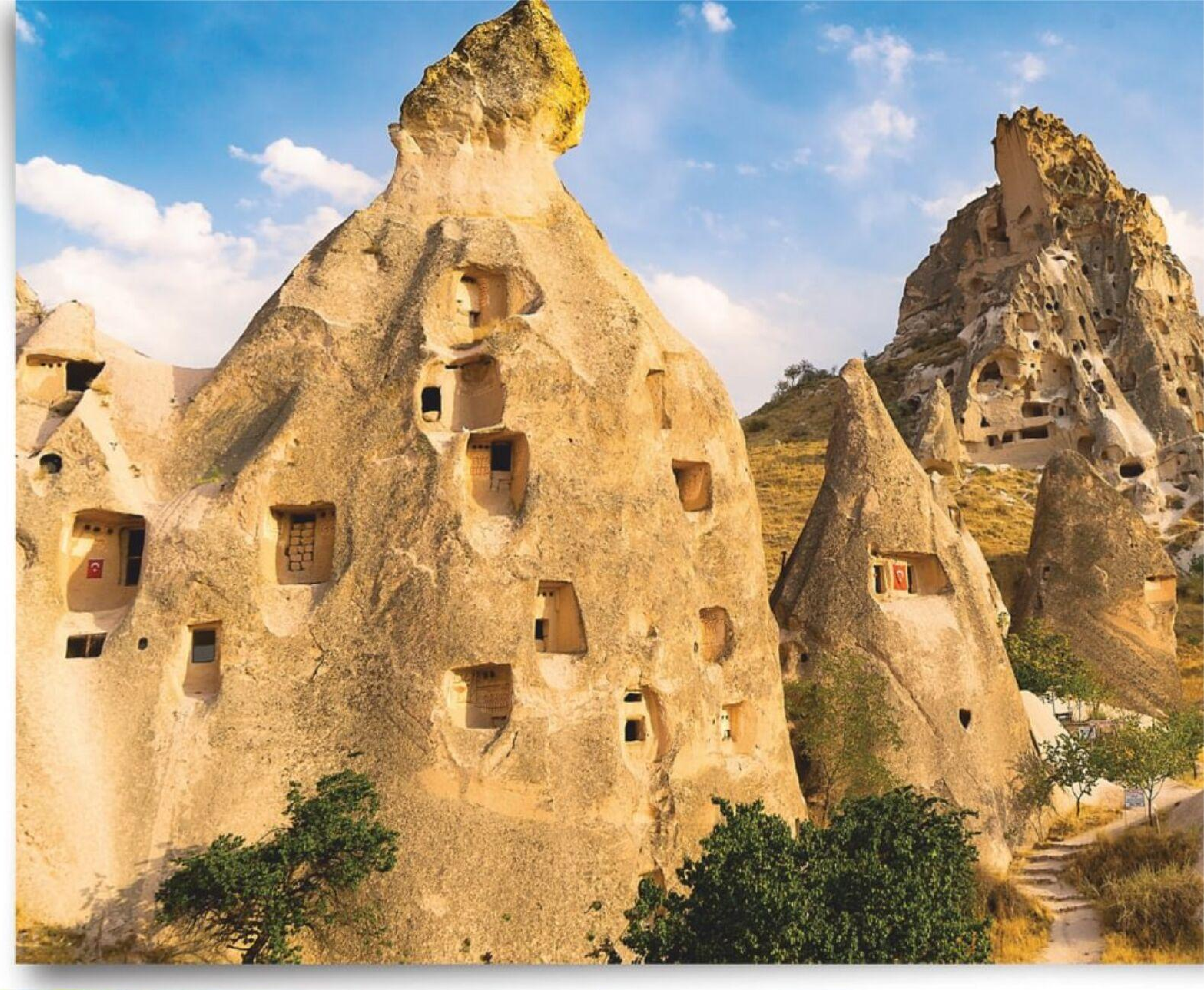
**You can't help feeling like Indiana Jones when you arrive at Petra, so astounding are these ruins of an ancient city hewn into sandstone walls in Jordan's barren desert. Constructed 2,000 years ago to capitalize on the spice trade, the bustling settlement was abandoned after an earthquake and largely unknown to the outside world until rediscovery in 1812. Now it waits to be discovered by you.**



# BLUE MOSQUE

## Istanbul

Sponsored by Ottoman sultan Ahmed I in the early 1600s, architect Sedefkar Mehmed Agfa aimed for building a mosque of undeniable size and splendor. With its cascading domes, sextet of fluted minarets and huge courtyard, the Blue Mosque certainly hit the mark. Today it serves as a popular tourist attraction and a functioning mosque that can hold 10,000 worshippers in its carpeted prayer hall.



# Burgundy

## FRANCE

**You don't have to be an oenophile to fall head over heels with the graceful vineyards, bucolic countryside and Old-World chateaus of central France's Burgundy region. But given that it is possibly the world's most renowned wine-making area, uncorking a very nice bottle of local pinot noir or chardonnay can only deepen your appreciation of the terrain, and the *terroir*.**

# Cappadocia Fairy Chimneys

### TURKEY

**History tells us that early Christians carved homes, churches and hidden caverns into mushroom-shaped geological formations on the Anatolian plateau in order to hide themselves from Roman persecution. It's OK to suspect that they also were motivated by pure whimsy. If you're feeling the same, modern visitors are more welcome and can even sleep in cave-like chimney hotels.**

# LUCERNE

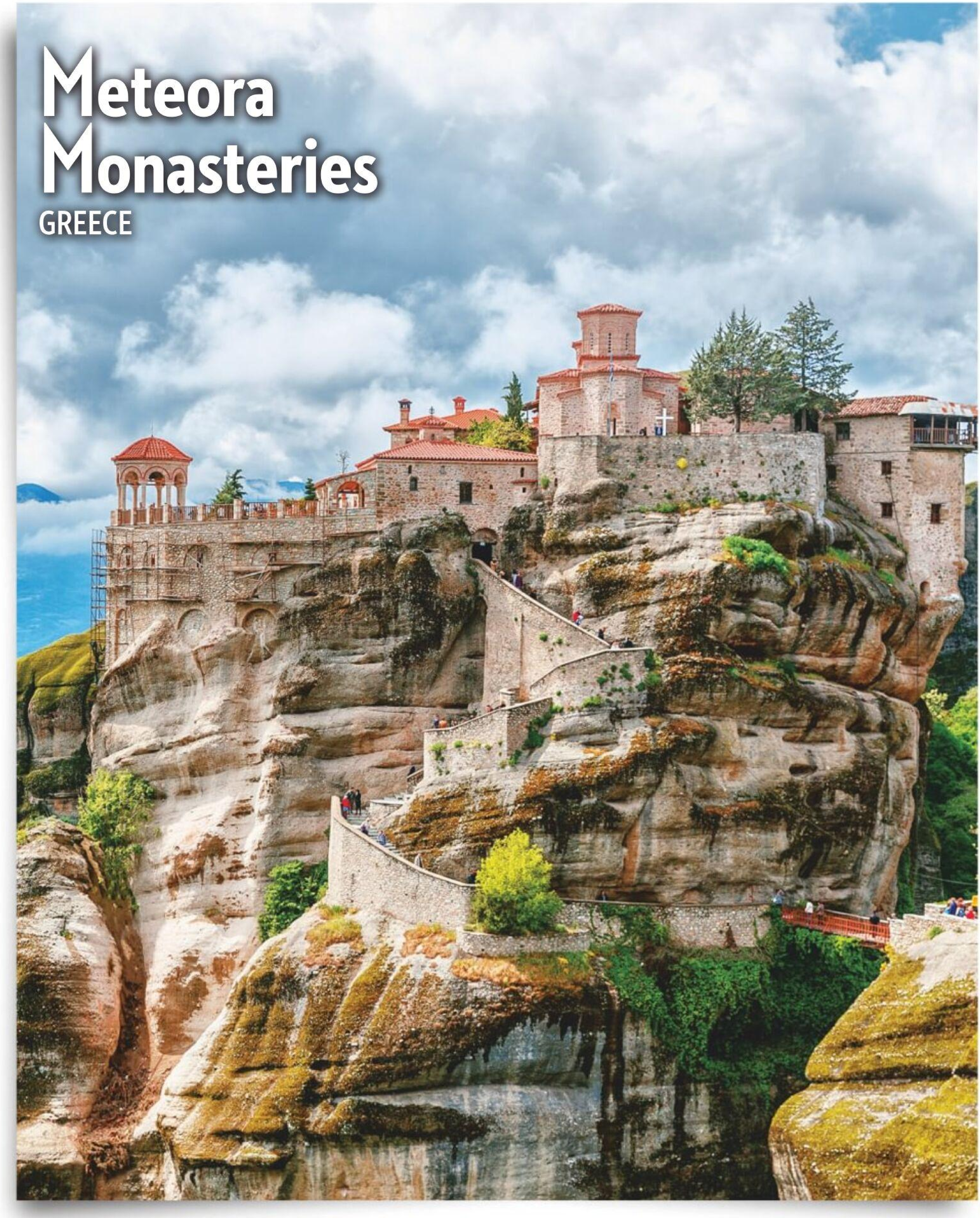
### Switzerland

**Nestled between Lake Lucerne and the Alps, Lucerne is one of the prettiest cities on the planet. The lengthy, covered Chapel Bridge and water tower are irresistible to shutterbugs, and even a medieval defensive wall is topped by nine towers illuminated by floodlights at night. Best of all, most of Lucerne's sights are easily visited by foot, perhaps on the way to a cheese fondue dinner.**

LUCERNE TOURISM

# Meteora Monasteries

## GREECE



Did Eastern Orthodox monks of medieval times construct their monasteries to cling improbably to the steep sides of rock pillars in order to be closer to God? Actually, it was to provide protection from the expanding Ottoman Empire. Today these architectural and historical marvels are open to the public and, unlike back then, actually provide stairs for reaching them.

# Antelope Canyon

## ARIZONA

There are a few special spots on Earth where erosion becomes high art. Possibly tops among them are the slot canyons of the American Southwest. Follow a Navajo guide through an unremarkable crack in a rock face and emerge into a secret dreamworld of narrow, swirled sandstone walls illuminated in fantastical ways by shafts of sunlight from above. Every step reveals a masterpiece.

The Swing at the End of the World
Banos, Ecuador